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兵庫県在住。2003年、第8回スニーカー大賞〈大賞〉を『涼宮ハルヒの憂鬱』で受賞し、デビューを果たす。また、電撃文庫より『学校を出よう！』シリーズも刊行中。趣味はバイクと麻雀。人生右往左往中。今一番欲しいものは無料で牌譜取ってくれる人と脳内物質。

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The Boredom of Suzumiya Haruhi

By: Nagaru Tanigawa
Illustrated by: Noizi Ito
Translated by: Baka-Tsuki

Prologue

As much as I'd like to say the club was founded on the melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi, my own melancholy would be a much more appropriate description. The SOS Brigade was established in early spring, while the whole self-made movie incident happened in the autumn. The project caused me to sigh endlessly, but hardly fazed Haruhi.

Half a year had gone by between the two events. Of course, in that time, which included the summer, Haruhi could not and did not let time pass by pointlessly. It was no surprise that there had been so many illogical and absurd incidents. I don't even know if some of them were real incidents or just accidents. Let's just say that we were pulled into everything against our desires.

No matter what you say, seasons come and seasons go. As the average temperature rises, inconceivable ideas arise endlessly from Haruhi's mind, similar to how different kinds of insects appear out of nowhere. It would be all right if she kept those ideas inside her head, but no, those ideas always result in a variety of creepy situations that the whole group is forced to deal with properly. What is going on?

I don't know what Koizumi, Nagato, or Asahina-san are thinking, but here is what my self-diagnosis tells me, at least. My mind and body are healthy, but every time something happens, I feel as if I am some sort of small round animal that can't move easily because I ate too much. The same ending always happens, and that is myself rolling on and on down the hill.

Perhaps I have already started rolling.

Haruhi has a very bothersome habit: whenever her mind is not filled with happy thoughts, she starts thinking up ideas that make you want to laugh and cry at the same time. Anyway, she just cannot endure sitting still and doing nothing. She is just that kind of person. Whenever she has nothing to do, she will go and find something to do. This will usually be something absurd. From my personal experiences, whenever Haruhi says something, the rest of us will not be able to enjoy our peaceful days. Perhaps those good old days will never come back. What a troublesome person.

It doesn't matter if the result is good or bad, as long as her life is not boring. That's Suzumiya Haruhi for you.

Because this is a rare chance, let me share with you how our SOS brigade fought back "boredom" during the half a year when our melancholy became frustration. As to why I said this is a rare chance, I actually don't know. I just think that it wouldn't do me harm if I shared the stories. And, anyway, I really hope that at least one person will "share" my indescribable feelings.

Yes… Let's start with that silly baseball game.

The Boredom of Suzumiya Haruhi

One day in the headquarters of the "Save the world by Overloading it with fun: Suzumiya Haruhi's Brigade," or SOS Brigade for short (in reality the Literature Club room), Haruhi announced with the same enthusiasm as a baseball team captain who drew the first seed at Koushien:

"We are entering the baseball tournament!"

It was after school one day in June, and it had been two weeks since the "nightmare" event. Since then, I had been unable to concentrate on my studies. My test results were a real life nightmare, on this early summer day. Haruhi didn't seem like she had been paying attention in class, yet her results made it into the top 10. If there exists a God in this world, I believe that he is a mischievous and biased person.

Oh well, this didn't matter anymore. I am more concerned with the content of Haruhi's announcement. What was she talking about?

I looked around at the three other people in the room.

The first that caught my eye was Asahina-san, her face as innocent as that of a middle school student. If she had white fluffy wings, she would look like a cute little angel on her way back to heaven. Her face and small body suits her. I know full well that she can be very glamorous.

For reasons unknown to me, Asahina-san was the only person in the room not wearing her high school uniform. Instead, she was wearing a pink nurse uniform. With her cute lips half opened, she looked intently at Haruhi. She is not a nursing student nor a costume-wearing weirdo, but is just merely following the instructions of Haruhi. Haruhi must have bought this costume from some odd website again. She's been bringing weird clothes and making Asahina-san wear them. I believe many people would be asking the same question, "What's the point in wearing these clothes?"

She replied, "Why do we need an explanation for that?"

Haruhi instructed Asahina-san, "You must wear this costume whenever you're in this room, always!" Asahina-san would resist with "But, but…" In the end, she would still obediently follow Haruhi's commands with tears in her eyes. She looked so adorable that sometimes I felt compelled to embrace her from behind. Yet so far I have not been able to do that, I assure you.

By the way, just for your information, two weeks ago her standard attire was a maid costume, but right now it's hanging on the clothes rack. Actually the maid costume suits Asahina-san better and I preferred it more, so I do hope she would revert to that costume soon. I believe Asahina-san would comply with the audience's request, though she would be troubled and embarrassed by it. Yup, that would be good.

After hearing Haruhi's speech on the baseball tournament, Asahina-san the nurse made her comment,

"Umm……"

She made a sound as sweet as a canary then stopped. It was natural for her to have such a reaction.

I turned my gaze to the other girl in the room.

Her height is similar to Asahina-san's, but her presence, compared to Asahina-san, was like that of a thin cabbage to a sunflower. Nagato Yuki, as always, was indifferent to her surroundings as her gaze was fixed on her open hardbound book.

About every ten seconds, she would flip the pages with her finger, it was then that people could realize that this girl was still living. I was sure a parrot would have a bigger vocabulary than she would, and even a hibernating groundhog would be more active than she is.

As her presence doesn't really make a difference, there was no need to describe her in detail. If I have to make a brief description, then she's a first year student, like Haruhi and me, and she is the sole member of the Literature Club - the original occupant of this room. In other words, our club, the SOS Brigade, has borrowed the use of this room from the Literature Club. To be more precise, we have taken over this room like parasites. Of course the school has not approved of this, since our application to form a club has been ignored by the student council.

"……"

I turned my gaze away from Nagato's expressionless face, and saw sitting by the side the handsome grinning face of Koizumi Itsuki. He looked at me with an amused expression. This guy's opinions were of lesser importance than Nagato's. This mysterious transfer student - according to Haruhi anyway - brushed aside his bangs and slowly broke into a smile, much to my chagrin. As our eyes met, I had a strong urge to punch him as he shrugged his shoulders meaninglessly. He was seriously asking for a beating.

"What did you say we are entering?"

As no one said anything, I, as always, replied on behalf of the group. Why does everyone treat me as a communication relay to Haruhi? Nothing is as bothersome as this duty.

"This."

Haruhi gave me a flyer cheerfully. I took a glance at Asahina-san, who had bad memories with flyers, and saw her backing away trembling, and read out the words on the piece of paper.

"The Ninth City Amateur Baseball Tournament."

It was probably a tournament to decide which baseball team was the best in the city. It was organized by the city council, and seemed to have some history, being held every year.

"Hmm……"

I raised my head. Haruhi's one-hundred percent smile almost glowed straight into my eyes, I backed away for half a step involuntarily.

"So, who's entering this field baseball tournament?"

I knew the answer already, yet I still decided to ask.

"Us, obviously!" Haruhi said firmly.

"When you say us, does that include me, Asahina-san, Nagato, and Koizumi?"

"Who else can it be?"

"Couldn't you have asked for our consent first?"

"We'll need to find four more people."

As usual, she only hears the things she wants to hear. I suddenly thought of something.

"Do you know the rules for baseball?"

"More or less. It just involves pitching, catching, base running, sliding and blocking. I joined the Baseball Team for a bit, so I know the basics."

"A bit? Just how long did you join them for?"

"Just under an hour. It was dead boring so I left."

If baseball was so boring, then why join a baseball tournament? And why do we have to participate as well? Faced with my natural question, Haruhi made the following reply,

"This is a chance to leave our mark on the world! If we win this tournament, we could become famous overnight, it's a great opportunity!"

First, I don't want the name of this brigade being spread even further. Secondly, so what if the SOS Brigade becomes famous overnight? What do you mean by a great opportunity?

I didn't know what to say, and Asahina-san looked stunned as well. Koizumi mumbled, "So that's how it is," without looking concerned. As for Nagato, was she troubled by it? She probably didn't even hear what was being said, as she remained as still as a pottery, her face remained blank as ever.

“Isn’t it a nice idea, Mikuru-chan?”

Faced with Haruhi’s sudden question, Asahina-san seemed withdrawn,

“Eh? But… But……”

“Well?”

Like a crocodile ambushing a little deer drinking water at the lake, Haruhi moved behind Asahina-san, who was about to stand up, and grabbed the tiny nurse - or hospital attendant to be precise - from behind.

“Kyaa! Wh… What are you doing?!”

“Listen, in this brigade, the orders of the commander are absolute. Insubordination is a serious offense! We’ll handle all opinions during the meeting!”

Meeting? Does she mean those meetings which she holds whenever she felt like stuffing weird ideas down our throats?

Haruhi grappled Asahina-san’s neck with her snake-like arms as Asahina-san struggled,

“Doesn’t baseball sound like fun? Just so you know, our target is to win this! Not a single defeat will be accepted! Because I hate losing!”

“Wah……”

Asahina-san rolled her eyes and blushed furiously as she trembled. While Haruhi held Asahina-san tight like a professional wrestler and nibbled at her ears while staring at me fiercely, seemingly unhappy with me, and looking enviously at Asahina-san.

“Any problems?”

It wouldn’t matter even if we had any. No matter what we say, you never intended to listen to them anyway.

“I don’t see why not.”

Hey! Don’t just agree blindly! How about raising your objection every once in a while?

“Then I’ll go get the baseball equipment from the Baseball Team!”

Haruhi bolted out of the classroom like a small tornado. Asahina-san, finally free from Haruhi’s grasp, slumped onto her chair exhausted.

Koizumi expressed his thoughts. “We should be lucky that she’s not starting a war to capture aliens or planning a trip in search for Unidentified Mysterious Animals. Baseball has nothing to do with the terrifying paranormal phenomena which we fear most, right?”

“Makes sense.”

I’ve decided to agree with his reasoning for now. No matter how insane Haruhi is, she has not asked to go search for aliens, time travelers and espers. If that’s the case, instead of wandering around the city searching for supernatural occurrences which was near impossible (this happened to be the main activity of the SOS Brigade), we might as well play a game of baseball. Besides, even Asahina-san was nodding her head in agreement.

However, our speculations were wide off the mark. Not only did they miss their target, the arrows fired by Haruhi had shot through the wall and had flown off somewhere. I only learned of this soon after.

At any rate, I thought to myself, even if it’s not baseball, anything that could attract attention would do for her. The SOS Brigade which Haruhi had carried the banner for not only has a despicable name, it’s not even a club, not to mention it’s not recognized by the school, it was only created because she felt like it.

The official name, “Save the world by Overloading it with Fun: Suzumiya Haruhi’s Brigade,” is not only long and condescending, it just sounds abstractly absurd. After my suggestion to shorten the name got cruelly rejected, I had not been able to find a chance to change its name.

I once asked Haruhi what kind of activity this club is involved in, Haruhi replied with the face of a soldier who had just cut off the head of the enemy general,

“To find aliens, time travelers, and espers, and play with them!”

This was the famous quote of the eccentric Suzumiya Haruhi, well-known around school since the beginning, and has been associated with queerness ever since she said that.

This was just like crows searching for glowing objects; cats leaping at any small rolling objects; and rushing for the insecticide when one sees a cockroach in the kitchen. Once she sees something that interests her, be it dodgeball, netball or cricket, she’ll probably yell loudly, “I want to do that!” Maybe I should be grateful we aren’t playing rugby, since we would need to find more people to make up the numbers for rugby.

To put it simply, Haruhi was just feeling bored.

I had no idea what deal Haruhi had gone through, but she returned like a cyclone carrying a whole box of baseball equipment. Inside the small cardboard box which looked as though it contained an abandoned puppy were nine worn-out baseball gloves and a baseball bat with plenty of dents on it, as well as a few dirty hard baseballs.

"Wait,"

I said, looking once again at the flyer description,

"This is a softball tournament. Why are you bringing baseballs?"

"What's the difference? They're still balls, and they still fly when you hit them with a bat. Don't worry about that."

I remember playing baseball back in elementary school, but I haven't touched this game ever since then. However, I at least knew the major difference between a baseball and a softball - it hurts when you get whacked by a regular baseball.

"Then wouldn't it be fine as long as we don't hit anyone?"

Haruhi rejected my objection with a look that said, *I don't see what all the fuss is about.*

I decided not to argue with her,

"Then when's the match gonna be held?"

"This Sunday."

"That's the day after tomorrow!! Isn't that way too soon!?"

"But I've already registered. Oh, don't worry, I've decided the team will be called the SOS Brigade. That I'm pretty sure of."

I felt exasperated. "…so where are you going to find the other team members?"

"We'll just randomly grab anyone walking around."

Are you serious? With the exception of one person, anyone targeted by Haruhi is usually not a normal person. That rare exception would be me. And I had no intention on getting acquainted with even more mysterious people,

"All right then, you stay put. I'll take care of choosing the team. First…"

I thought of the guys in Class 1-5. The only ones who would come at once without hesitation… That'll be Taniguchi and Kunikida I guess.

Hearing my suggestion, Haruhi replied,

“Those would do.”

She treats her classmates as mere objects.

“It’s better than none.”

The other guys would probably flee at the mention of Suzumiya Haruhi’s name. Now, where to find the other two players?

“Excuse me,”

Asahina-san politely raised her arm and said,

“If it’s possible for my friend……”

“Then that’ll do.”

Haruhi responded immediately. Looks like anyone was fine. Maybe for you it didn’t matter who it was, but I was concerned. Asahina-san’s friend? When and where did she befriend someone?

Asahina-san probably noticed my concerned look and said to me,

“It’s fine. This person…is a friend I’ve met in class,”

She tried to allay my fears. At this moment, Koizumi spoke as well,

“In that case, maybe I should bring a friend as well? In fact, I know someone who’s interested in our club…”

I shut him up before he could finish. There’s no need to bring your buddies over, they’re going to be freaks anyway.

“I’ll think of someone.”

If there was no selection criteria, then there are other friends I know of. Haruhi nodded her head pleasingly.

“Then let us begin our training!”

Oh boy, it was only natural for the topic to come to this.

“We start now.”

Now!? Where?

“In the track field.”

Bring it on! The sound of the Baseball Team yelling their slogans can be heard outside the window.

Speaking of which - I know it’s awkward to suddenly change the subject - but I have to let you know, besides myself, the other four people gathered here in this room, for certain reasons, are not normal people. Only Haruhi wasn’t aware of this. The other three have all willingly revealed their identities to me, and hope that I would understand. If my common sense was like the Earth, then the three of them would be as incomprehensible as objects revolving beyond the orbit of Pluto. However, since the end of last month, I have gone through some experiences that led me to believe that they might be telling the truth. I didn’t want to know the truth, but ever since I was forced into Haruhi’s club, I don’t think this small wish of mine has ever been granted.

To put it simply, the reason Asahina-san, Nagato, and Koizumi would appear in this school was all because of Haruhi. They all seem to hold a particular interest in Haruhi.

To me, she was just a very giddy high school girl. But I was the only one who thought that way, and lately, I’m having doubts myself about this belief as well.

I can guarantee that it wasn’t me that was going crazy.

It was the whole world that was going crazy.

Thanks to the experiences mentioned above, I was now standing in the dusty track field with the other out-of-this-world members of the brigade.

Being forced off the field by us, the Baseball Team looked stunned at us. I mean, how else would they react? A mysterious club suddenly appears, with a sailor uniform schoolgirl, who seems to be their leader, waving a baseball bat and yelling insanely. While they were still busy being awestruck, the track field, which was reserved for the Baseball Team, was taken over before they even knew it. They were even made to pick up and throw the baseballs. How can they not be bewildered?

Not to mention our group was dressed in normal school uniforms, plus one nurse amongst us.

“Let’s start with a thousand bats!”

Just as Haruhi had forecasted, standing in a row on the pitcher’s mound, we were now covered in a rain of baseballs.

“Kyaa!”

Asahina-san knelt down and covered her head with her glove, I risked my life to catch the balls, making sure they don't hit her. Speaking of which, each of Haruhi's strikes had a killing instinct in them. No matter what she does, she always goes all out.

Koizumi carried his usual grin and easily dodged the balls.

"Hmm, I haven't played like this for a long time. Makes me feel nostalgic about it."

Koizumi casually stepped away from Haruhi's wild strikes while revealing his snow white teeth to me. If you have so much energy, why don't you come help protect Asahina-san!?

I turned to Nagato and saw her standing very still while facing Haruhi. She just stood there, completely ignoring the balls flying towards her direction. Not even when the ball flew past her ear by a few centimeters did she move a bit. Occasionally she would slowly move her gloved left hand, like a remote-controlled robot, and catch the balls that would directly hit her, then slowly put her hand down again. You ought to move around more. Or perhaps I should compliment you on your good eyes?

Maybe I shouldn't be paying attention to other people, as a bouncing hard ball skipped past my glove and under my legs, and went straight for Asahina-san's knees. How careless of me.

"Ouch!"

Asahina-san the nurse yelled, "It hurts……"

She started to sob, I can't take this any longer.

"I'm counting on you guys!"

After telling Koizumi and Nagato that, I shielded Asahina-san and brought her out of the white line.

"Hey! Where're you going? Kyon! Mikuru-chan! Come back here!"

"She needs medical treatment!"

I lifted my hand and ignored Haruhi's protests, then carried Asahina-san's arm as I led her to the clinic. I'm sure her nurse uniform would fit in better in the clinic than inside the dusty club room or the rough track field. I can't be wrong about this.

Asahina-san covered her eyes with her hands to rub off her tears as she walked shoulder to shoulder with me on the corridor, it was only then that she realized she was leaning against me,

"Kyaa!"

She made a sound so cute that I would have loved to record it, and leaped away while looking up at me with her slightly reddened cheeks,

“Kyon-kun, you can’t. If you get too close to me… It’ll happen again…”

What’ll happen again? I shrugged my shoulders and said, “Asahina-san, you can go back now. I’ll tell Haruhi that the injury on your leg would take two days to heal.”

“But…”

“Don’t worry. Haruhi’s the one who’s wrong, there’s no need for Asahina-san to feel guilty about it.”

I shook my hand and said that. Asahina-san lowered her head slightly and glanced at me, her teary-eyed look simply increased her charm further.

“Thank you.”

As Asahina-san gave me a smile so adorable my legs nearly wobbled, she turned around at me as though feeling sorry, then finally walked off. Couldn’t Haruhi learn from her for once? I have a feeling she wouldn’t look bad at all like that.

When I returned to the field, the batting practice was still in progress. What surprised me was that the members of the Baseball Team were now in defense, while Koizumi and Nagato stood outside the field.

When Koizumi saw me, he smiled happily.

“Oh, you’ve returned?”

“What’s she up to now?”

“Just as you see. It seems she wasn’t satisfied with our performance, and she’s been like that since then.”

She was simply incredible. Every ball she hit flew to the direction that she had intended.

The three of us had nothing to do apart from observing Haruhi’s astounding strikes. This mentally insane girl finally put down her bat and rubbed off her sweat while looking very satisfied. Koizumi said cheerfully, “She’s really amazing. She actually managed a thousand hits.”

“What’s really amazing is that you actually bothered to count.”

"……"

Nagato turned away silently, I decided to follow her as well.

"Hey,"

I made a suggestion to the little schoolgirl in her sailor uniform. "Could you make it rain on the day of the match? A big one that would force the match to be canceled."

"It's not impossible." Nagato walked while answering plainly, "But it is not recommended."

"Why's that?"

"Partial data alteration of the environment would result in side-effects in the planet's ecosystem."

"Side-effects? For how long?"

"A few centuries to ten thousand years."

Now that's a long time.

"Then it's better not to do it."

"Indeed."

Nagato nodded her head forward for five centimeters, then continued to walk forward without stopping.

I turned around and saw Haruhi standing on the pitcher's mound preparing to pitch.

Two days later. Sunday. 8.00 A.M. Sharp.

We were gathered at the Municipal Sports Ground. There were two baseball fields adjacent to the athletic track field. The tournament would take two weeks to complete. The tournament uses five-inning games. The semi-finalists were to be decided by tonight, with the semi-finals and final being played next Sunday. Only our team was dressed in our school's track suit, while the other teams were dressed in their standard baseball uniforms. This is a bit off topic, but I'd still like to mention this, this was the first time I've seen Nagato wear something else besides her school uniform.

I later learned that this grass baseball tournament had quite some history (this was the ninth installment), it looked like a prestigious tournament. If that was the case, how I wished the organizers would reject Haruhi's application when she handed it in.

I might as well mention this, after giving Taniguchi and Kunikida a call, the two of them agreed to come right away. Taniguchi's targets were Asahina-san and Nagato, while Kunikida said, "This sounds like fun" and decided to come as well. I'm glad that they're both so simple-minded.

The person Asahina-san brought to help was a second year female upperclassman called Tsuruya. Her hair was as long as that of Haruhi's before she cut it short. She was an energetic girl, as when she saw me she said,

"So you're Kyon-kun? Mikuru always talked about you. Hmm…"

For some reason, Asahina-san felt very nervous with this comment. Just what did she say about me?

At this moment, the fourth player I brought was now facing off with Haruhi.

"Kyon, come over here."

Haruhi dragged me towards the side of the organizer's tent with her incredible strength.

"Just what were you thinking? Look at that thing, you're actually going to let her play baseball?"

"What do you mean 'that thing?' Isn't that a bit too rude? She may be 'a thing,' but she's still my sister."

"She even introduced herself, saying she's now in fifth grade and is ten years old. She's too adorable to be your sister. No, that's not the point, it would have been fine if she were playing in the junior baseball league, but this is a baseball tournament for all ages!"

I didn't just bring my sister without thinking, this was all part of my meticulous plan. I thought - why on Earth do I want to get up on Sunday morning just to do some exercise? I never intended this. It was inevitable that things have developed to its current state. If that's the case, it was only natural for me to at least want this tournament, which I have no interest in, to be over as quickly as possible. It would be excellent if we lose in no time and everyone can go home. Even without my sister, with such a rag-tag group, we'll definitely lose the first game, since the leader of this team is none other than Suzumiya Haruhi. If we accidentally win, it would create a chain of bothersome events. This was why I had to inject something that would ensure the team would lose. If I brought an amateur elementary schoolgirl in, we would surely lose. Like hell we would win!

Of course I couldn't let Haruhi know what I was thinking, I wasn't that insane after all.

"Hmph, forget it." Haruhi snorted and turned around. "We'll let them win one inning. It won't be fun if we win too much."

Looks like she's hellbent on winning, just how does she intend to win?

“We still haven’t decided on the fielding positions and batting order yet, what do you have in mind?”

“I’ve already thought of that.”

Haruhi’s face shone with satisfaction, as she took out a piece of paper from her track suit pocket. Leaving till today to decide on the positions, I have no idea what criteria she uses to decide who plays where.

“I’ve decided to use this, I’m sure no one would disagree?”

There were two pieces of papers. Each piece was drawn with eight lines. It resembled those ladder-tracing lottery games, was I seeing things?

“What are you talking about? Of course it’s a lottery. It’s divided into lottery for batting and fielding positions. I’ll be the pitcher and first batter, by the way.”

“So you’ve decided on this method instead?”

“What’s with that look of yours? You got a problem with that? This is the most democratic way. Ancient Greek leaders were chosen by ladder-tracing as well, you know!”

Stop comparing the political system of Ancient Greece with the selection method of a modern Japanese baseball team. Besides, you only decided this on your whim, just how democratic is that?

…Forget it. This way, we could lose quickly. According to the tournament rules, the game would end if the score difference between the teams was more than ten runs. I think I should prepare to go home now, since our first opponent was a top team with the best defense in the tournament for the past three years.

The Kamigahara Pirates. This was the baseball team of some nearby university. In a way, they had a tough playing style. They were all very serious, intending to win. We could catch a glimpse of their prowess just by watching their pre-match warm up. Their screams were so full of power, even their pitching was breathtaking. This was a proper team. From a bystander’s point of view, they were a formidable opponent. I thought to myself - have we come to the wrong place? At that moment, I really wanted to take a look around to make sure whether this was the venue for the baseball tournament - the Municipal Sports Ground.

While I don’t feel that losing is a bad thing, I started to have an urge to escape from this impending tragedy. Our team was so crappy that I felt like apologizing to our opponents.

Just when I was about to formulate an escape plan, Haruhi made everyone stand in one row,

“I’m going to give out my strategy, everyone follow my instructions.”

She sounded so much like a coach.

“Listen carefully, our priority is to reach base. Once we reach base, we’ll be able to steal a base before the pitcher throws all three pitches. Swing at the ball if it’s a strike, but ignore it if it’s a ball. Simple, isn’t it? Just follow my plan and we’ll be able to get at least three runs per inning,”

That was our game plan according to that brain of Haruhi’s, but just what was her confidence based on? It was based on nothing, of course. She is the physical manifestation of baseless confidence. But wouldn’t this sort of person usually be called an “idiot?” Besides, this girl is not just a normal idiot, she is an idiot at the top of the idiot food chain, the Queen Idiot of the Idiot World.

Let me announce the batting and fielding position of the “SOS Brigade” baseball team, decided by the God of Lottery:

First batter, pitcher: Suzumiya Haruhi. Second batter, right fielder: Asahina Mikuru. Third batter, center fielder: Nagato Yuki. Fourth batter, second baseman: Me. Fifth batter, left fielder: My sister. Sixth batter, catcher: Koizumi Itsuki. Seventh batter, first baseman: Kunikida. Eighth batter, third baseman: Tsuruya-san. Ninth batter, shortstop: Taniguchi.

That was the line-up of our team. There were no substitutes or managers, and no cheerleaders even.

After both teams paid their respects to each other, Haruhi went straight for the batter’s box. Completely forgetting the existence of helmets, we had to borrow some second-hand white helmets from the organizing committee. If there were anything that truly belonged to us, then it would have to be the nine yellow loudspeakers Haruhi brought for us.

Haruhi pushed the tip of her helmet upwards and picked up the aluminum bat she snatched from the Baseball Team, then revealed a fearless smile.

When the umpire yelled, “Play ball!” The opponent pitcher stretched his arm back and prepared to throw the first pitch.

Whack!

A loud clear metallic sound was made, and the white ball flew far off. It went over the head of the center fielder and bounced off the wall. By the time the ball was thrown infield, Haruhi had already run to the second base.

I wasn’t particularly surprised, as this was a piece of cake for Haruhi. Asahina-san and Koizumi felt the same as well. As for Nagato, I guess her emotions does not include being surprised.

However, the other members of the team besides us four were all stunned, and looked awestruck at Haruhi, who lifted both her arms and gave a V-sign. Our opponents were even more dumbfounded.

“Their pitcher’s nothing! Just do what I did and you’ll be fine!”

Haruhi yelled confidently. Unfortunately, what she did had the opposite effect. Since this would lead our opponents to cancel the thought of showing mercy on our girls.

Our second batter, Asahina-san, wore her wide helmet and walked hesitantly towards the batter’s box.

“M, may the best wi…… Kyaa!”

Before she could finish, a high angled straight ball came shooting over. How dare these bastards do that!? If you strike Asahina-san out in three strikes, you’ll have to face serious consequences, a brawl was inevitable at best!

Asahina-san had become as stiff as a Buddha statute, and only looked as the remaining two pitches flew past her. When the umpire announced that she was struck out, she breathed a sigh of relief and returned to the bench.

“Hey! Why aren’t you swinging the bat!?”

Haruhi’s complaints are nothing, what’s important was that Asahina-san was safe.

Nagato, our third batter, walked silently to the batter’s box, dragging the tip of aluminum bat on the ground.

“……”

She ignored all the balls being pitched and was struck out very quickly. She then silently returned to the bench, took off her helmet and handed the bat to the next batter - me.

“……”

She quietly sat on the bench and reverted to being a decorative doll.

Haruhi’s yells were becoming annoying. Geez, it’s your fault for expecting so much from Asahina-san and Nagato.

“Kyon! You’ve gotta hit this! You’re the fourth batter! The cleanup hitter!”

I really do wish you wouldn’t put so much hope on a fourth batter who was just picked by lottery.

I learned from Nagato and stood in the batter's box silently.

I didn't swing at the first pitch. It was a strike. Now that was scary. That ball was fast. It basically sliced through the air and made a swishing noise. I had no idea what its speed was, but I guess it's faster than one could blink. In fact, the moment I felt the pitcher had thrown the ball out, the ball had already landed in the catcher's glove. Did Haruhi actually hit this sort of pitch?

The second pitch. Whoa! The ball curved. Is this what they call a curveball? If I ignored it, it would be a ball, but I still swung at it. And so it ended with three consecutive strike outs, and both sides had to switch positions.

"You idiot!"

When our opponents went to their dugout to take a break, Haruhi yelled furiously at the left field and threw her glove to the ground.

This was too embarrassing.

To be precise, our defense had more holes than you would find in a tropical savanna ant hill.

The outfield defense was especially ridiculous. It was perfectly normal for our right fielder Asahina-san and my sister the left fielder to not catch any balls at all, this I could tell from their pre-match warm ups. So when the ball flew to the right field, it had to be retrieved by me the second baseman; when it flew to the left field, Taniguchi the short stop would have to run for his life to retrieve the ball. Whenever Asahina-san sees the ball flying towards her, she would kneel down and cover her head with her glove, so don't expect her to do any defending. As for my sister, she would chase the ball happily, but the ball would always land three feet away from where she was standing, so she wasn't of much help either.

Nagato the center fielder was flawless when catching the ball, but she only reacted to those that flew within her defensive perimeters, and her reactions were just dead slow. If a line drive flew past her, our opponent would have scored a run already.

……Might as well hurry up and lose so we can go home already! That wouldn't be too bad.

"C'mon! Bring it on!"

Only Haruhi walked enthusiastically towards the pitcher's mound. The gloves, shin guards and chest protector for our catcher Koizumi were of course all borrowed.

Our opponent's first batter bowed to the organizers, then headed to the batter's box.

Haruhi slung her arm and made her first pitch.

Strike.

It was a very good strike, be it the angle, speed or control of the ball. The ball landed right in the center of the strike zone. The strike had so much power that the batter didn't even have a chance to swing his bat.

Of course, the SOS Brigade members, including myself, weren't surprised by this. If this girl were suddenly called up to the Japanese National Soccer Team, I think we won't be too shocked about it. There was nothing which was impossible for Haruhi.

It wasn't that simple for the opponent's first batter, though. He couldn't swing his bat for two consecutive strikes, and only managed to react for the third pitch, but he still struck out. It seems like one of those change up balls that curves slightly when entering the strike zone, it was as unpredictable as Haruhi's personality.

The second batter listened to the suggestions of the first batter, who never managed a hit, and tried to bunt. Yet he hit the ball outside the foul line twice and missed the third pitch, so he was struck out as well.

Seeing how the situation was beginning to change, even I was feeling uneasy. Both teams weren't going to drag on like this till the last inning, were they? As expected from their clean-up man, the third batter made a direct hit on Haruhi's powerful fastball. If you keep pitching fastballs, it's only a matter of time before it gets hit.

The ball flew way past the head of Nagato, who remain rooted there, and disappeared into the distance. With the look of Medea who had just been betrayed by Jason, Haruhi looked intently at the third batter who had just hit a home run.

Anyway, we were now one run behind as a result.

The fourth batter managed to hit a double; while the fifth batter took advantage of an error from Kunikida, and our opponents ended up taking the first and third; the sixth batter scored a second run by hitting the ball out into the right field; the seventh batter hit the ball towards third base, the ball was picked up and quickly thrown home by Tsuruya-san, tagging the runner out. This ended the first inning.

At the end of the first inning, the score was 2-0. I never thought we would have fought this valiantly, though it'll give me more of a headache. Just hurry up and let them score ten runs so we can go home already!

At the start of the second inning, our fifth to seventh batters - my sister, Koizumi and Kunikida - were all struck out consecutively, we have already entered the second half of the inning before we could even draw our breath.

Our opponent seems to have identified the outfield as our main weakness, and it became obvious that they were targeting the ball towards that area. Every time Taniguchi and I would run frantically towards the outfield, trying to catch the ball, but our success rate was about 10%, and we were simply exhausted. Oh well, in order to relieve Asahina-san of her pain, running this much was a small price to pay. Since Asahina-san still looked so cute even when being scared senseless.

And so our opponent scored five runs in this inning. The score was now 7-0. Just three more runs and it'll be over. We should be able to wrap things up by the next inning, I guess.

First half of the third inning. Our turn for offense.

Tsuruya-san, who tied her long hair behind her head, kept hitting the ball foul. She seems like a very energetic person, but in the end she hit a ball that ended up landing in the catcher's glove. She tapped her helmet with the bat and said,

"Sure is hard! Just hitting the ball alone was already tough."

Haruhi frowned and seemed to be in deep thought. Whatever she's thinking, it wasn't going to be good.

"Hmm, looks like we'll have to use that……"

Haruhi murmured and slowly walked to the umpire and said, "Time out!"

She then grabbed Asahina-san, who was sitting obediently with a loudspeaker in her hand, by the neck,

"Kyaa!"

Haruhi dragged the slim figure in the track suit and disappeared behind the bench area. She and Asahina-san were each carrying a large sports bag, I would soon find out what those bags contained.

"W,wait…… Suzumiya-san! Nooo……"

Besides from Asahina-san's cute screams, the wind blew across the rough voice of Haruhi yelling away,

"Hurry up and take it off! Now put this on!"

Here we go again.

And so, when Asahina-san reappeared, she was dressed in the most appropriate attire for this situation. She wore a sleeveless shirt with bright blue and white colors, coupled with a mini-skirt, she even had two yellow pompoms.

Such an impeccable cheerleader. Where did she get this costume from? What a mystery.

"She looks gorgeous…"

Kunikida said enjoyably.

"Mikuru, can I take some pictures of you like that?"

Tsuruya-san giggled and took out her digital camera phone.

By the way, Haruhi was also dressed as a cheerleader. Wouldn't it be fine if only she were to wear that…… I didn't think like that then. To be honest, Asahina-san just looked too cute in that cheerleader costume, though she'd look cute in anything.

"I wonder if you'll look better with a ponytail?"

Haruhi caressed Asahina-san's hair and attempted to tie her hair behind the back of her head. When she noticed that I was watching, she scowled her mouth like a duck's beak and gave up tying the hair.

"Then, let's get to work!"

"Eh? W,w,what do we do?"

"We do this!"

Haruhi went behind Asahina-san and lifted her weak, pale arms, then began to swing then up and down. Such unbelievable choreography. Haruhi yelled loudly by Asahina-san's ear, "Scream! Scream loudly!"

"Wah…… Everyone, please do you best and score a run! Everyone…… Do your best!"

Asahina-san was forced to yell in such a pretentious way. At least Taniguchi was fired up by this, as he swung the bat with vigor, preparing to get on base. However, I have a feeling no matter how hard he tries, he's never going to hit the opponent's pitches.

As expected, Taniguchi returned dejected to the bench in no time.

"Man, this is hard."

And so, the batters position was rotated and Haruhi once again went to the batting zone.

In that cheerleader costume of hers.

It was quite a feast for the eyes when Haruhi and Asahina-san once dressed up as bunny girls, and right now their costumes were just as distracting.

Our opponents already didn't know where to look. Asahina-san was perfect in every way; while besides her personality, Haruhi was equally flawless - in both her looks and her figure.

Haruhi took full advantage of the opponent pitcher's error and made a hit, striking the ball towards the center field past the second base. During the confusion of the opponent's trying to scramble the ball back infield, she had already taken third base. The third baseman's eyes were looking in a suspicious angle when Haruhi slid towards the third base.

The next batter was a pretty cheerleader girl whose charms far surpass Haruhi's. Asahina-san held the bat with trepidation. Under the watchful glare of many guys (myself included), her face blushed furiously red in embarrassment. Such a great scene.

The pitcher was so distracted he could only throw a weak pitch, but Asahina-san still didn't swing her bat. The opponent even deliberately threw an easy-to-hit curveball.

"Yah!"

Her eyes were shut when she swung her bat, so a ball that could have been easily hit wasn't even scratched at all.

And so, Asahina-san was once again one pitch away from being struck out. At this moment, Haruhi began swinging her arms while standing on the third base. What was she doing?

"She seems to be making a signal."

Koizumi came and explained.

"Did we even have signals to begin with?"

"No. But from this situation, I can more or less imagine Suzumiya-san would resort to using signals. She's probably trying to call for a squeeze."

"Signing for a squeeze with two outs? Even a lame duck coach can do better than that."

"I deduce that she probably believes the chances of Asahina-san scoring a run is near zero, so she decided to employ a squeeze play, which would result in the infielders making an error; or perhaps if Asahina-san does manage to hit the ball, she might be able to do something as well?"

“The thing is that our opponent has figured that out already.”

The infielders have all gone into defensive positions and were prepared. What signals was Haruhi making? It just looked like she was signaling to hit the ball.

In the end, the squeeze play failed miserably. Asahina-san didn’t even know what squeeze play was, so she could only tilt her head and wonder what Haruhi’s signals meant. She was eventually struck out.

Asahina-san lowered her head and returned to the bench, with the look of a puppy who had just enraged her master. Haruhi called her over,

“Mikuru-chan, come over here, and close your jaws tightly.”

“Wah~~……”

Haruhi pinched hardly the sides of Asahina-san’s trembling cheeks with both her hands,

“This is your punishment! Let everyone see that cute face of yours.”

“Ah…… Ah……”

“Are you an idiot?”

I knocked on Haruhi’s head with my loudspeaker.

“It’s your fault for making such funny signals. Why don’t you go steal home plate yourself, you moron?”

Suddenly…

Beep beep beep! Koizumi took out a cell phone from his track suit pocket, and frowned after looking at the LCD screen.

Asahina-san looked shocked and pressed her left ear with her hand while looking off into the distance.

Nagato turned and looked vertically upwards into the sky.

When everyone else went to their defensive positions, Koizumi called me back.

“Something’s come up.”

I didn't want to know, but I'll hear what you have to say.

"A Sealed Dimension has appeared. Probably the largest we've ever seen, and it's expanding at a very rapid rate."

Sealed Dimension.

A gray world which I was too familiar with. How could I forget? Thanks to being trapped in that gloomy dimension, I now have to carry a mental scar for the rest of my life.

Koizumi continued to smile,

"That's how it is. Sealed Dimensions are created as a result of the pressure being subconsciously emitted by Suzumiya-san. Right now Suzumiya-san is very frustrated, which explains the appearance of one right now. Unless her mood improves, this Sealed Dimension is going to keep expanding, and the 'Avatars' which you're so familiar with will wreak havoc on everything."

"……You're saying Haruhi's getting moody because the team's losing? She can get so frustrated as to create such a retarded dimension?"

"Seems to be the case."

"She's so full of it!"

Koizumi made no comment but simply smiled at me. I sighed and said,

"This is so annoying."

Koizumi looked at me and said,

"What's the point in saying this now? You sound as though it has nothing to do with you. This is a serious incident, and you have a lot to do with it. Weren't our positions decided through lottery?"

"It was decided through lottery, so what?"

"And you were chosen as the clean-up."

"I don't feel glad at all with that."

"Suzumiya-san wouldn't care less about whether you felt glad or pressurized by it. The thing is that you were chosen as the clean-up."

"Can you please explain in a language I can understand?"

“Simple. Because this is what Suzumiya-san wishes, that’s why you were chosen as the fourth batter. This is not coincidental. She wishes for you to perform the role of the clean-up, but right now she is very disappointed that you have failed to live up to her expectations.”

“Well, sorry about that.”

“Hmm, I’m troubled by it as well. At this rate, Suzumiya-san’s mood would continue to deteriorate, and the Sealed Dimension would continue to expand.”

“……Then what should I do?”

“Do well in the game. If possible, make a long hit; or better still, a home run, especially those that fly very far off. How about scoring a very long home run, and even smashing the score board at the far side of the field?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I only score home runs in video games. How am I supposed to make such powerful swings?”

“We all sincerely hope that you can do it.”

No matter how much you hope, I’m neither a god nor an elf, how was I going to find a solution?

“Then try your best to prevent the opponent from ending the game within this inning. If the game ends here, then it’ll be the end for the world as well. No matter what, we must limit their score in this half to within two runs.”

Koizumi said in a very serious manner which didn’t fit in with this atmosphere.

The second half of the third inning began. Haruhi walked towards the pitcher’s mound in her cheerleader costume. Asahina-san also wore her cheerleader costume and went to the right field.

Haruhi revealed her arms and legs without hesitation, and ignored any runners on base while still throwing her pitches from the set.

The first batter struck the ball and it flew right in front of Nagato’s face. She made the out, but she didn’t even look at the fly ball hit by the second batter. When the ball rolled from the left field into the center field, he had already run to third base. Haruhi’s pitches were still full of power, but as she kept throwing fastballs, they were bound to get hit. As expected from the defending champions, they then scored two runs by making two hits and taking advantage of an error from Kunikida. The situation was now becoming critical. There were already runners standing on first and second base. Just one more run and this game would have to end forcefully, and no one will know what will happen to this world.

Whack! The white ball flew high and drifted towards the right field. Asahina-san stood at where the ball would land, and curled herself in fear. There was no time to think, I ran with my life for the umpteenth time towards the right wing. I've gotta get that ball!

I leapt and caught the ball. The ball barely went in through the tip of the glove.

"Argh!"

I then quickly threw the ball with all my force to Taniguchi, who was standing by at second base. The two runners thought this was going to be a long distance hit and were already going. Taniguchi quickly stepped on second. Double play!

Phew, we somehow managed to survive this. How exhausting.

"Nice play!"

I embraced the praising look of Asahina-san, while Taniguchi, Kunikida, my sister and Tsuruya-san all mobbed my head with their gloves. I gave them a V-sign while looking at Haruhi's reaction, and saw her carrying a troubled expression as she looked at the score board (which was basically a movable white board).

I sat on the bench and covered my face with a towel. Koizumi now walked towards me,

"Continuing where we left off,"

I really didn't want to hear this.

"There is a solution to this. When you and Suzumiya-san went to that world, how did you manage to return?"

Like I said, stop making me think of that again.

"If you use that method you used back then, we might be able to improve the situation."

"I refuse."

Heh heh heh Koizumi giggled. Now that laughing noise of his sure pissed me off.

"I knew you would say that. Then how about this? It'll be fine as long as we win this game. I've already thought of a good idea, it should be able to work, since she shares a common interest with us."

Koizumi grinned softly and headed towards Nagato, who was standing in the white on-deck circle staring blankly into the distance. He then mumbled something to the side of Nagato's ear, whose short hair seemed to wave slightly. Suddenly, Nagato turned her head and looked at me with her emotionless eyes.

Does that mean she agreed to it? She nodded her head like a puppet whose strings had just snapped, and walked in strides towards the Batter's box.

I turned my gaze leftwards and saw Asahina-san staring at Nagato,

"Nagato-san…… She's finally……"

She said with a pale expression, which made me concerned,

"What's she doing?"

"Nagato-san seems to be chanting incantations."

"Incantations? What the hell's that?"

"Um…… That's classified information."

I'm sorry. Asahina-san gestured as she lowered her head. That's fine, it can't be helped if it's classified information. Sigh, looks like that surreal stuff was about to happen again.

I had a firsthand experience with Nagato's incantations.

It was a very hot May evening, if Nagato hadn't barged into the classroom that day, I would now be taking a long nap in my grave. At that time Nagato was also chanting something very quickly, and defeated the person who was trying to kill me. Ah yes, Nagato was still wearing glasses back then.

What was she trying to do this time?

Then I understood at once.

The bat swung, it was a home run.

Nagato seemed to have just casually swung the bat, and struck the center of the pitcher's fastball. The ball flew high up above the field, and finally disappeared at the back of the wall.

I turned my gaze towards my teammates. Koizumi grinned elegantly and nodded to me; Asahina-san looked a bit stiff, but wasn't surprised; while my sister and Tsuruya-san simply exclaimed, "Wow……"

The others simply dropped their jaws and went into shock. Of course, it was the same for our opponents.

Haruhi leapt joyously towards the home plate and tapped on the helmet of Nagato, who had just circled all the bases with a blank expression.

“That was amazing! Where’d you get so much power from?”

Haruhi pulled and twisted Nagato’s tiny arms excitedly. Nagato still remained expressionless and allowed Haruhi to have her way.

A while later, Nagato walked towards the bench and handed the bat to me.

“This…” She pointed to the old baseball bat and said, “Alteration in boost attribute data.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked. Nagato looked at me for some time and said,

“Homing mode.”

She only said those words and walked back to the bench and sat at the corner, picking up a very thick book lying by the side and began to read it.

The score was now 9-1. It was the first half of the fourth inning. Looks like this’ll be the last inning.

The opposing pitcher still hasn’t recovered from the previous shock, but still managed to throw a good fastball towards me.

Now I finally understood the meaning of Nagato’s words.

“Whoa!”

The bat moved on its own, my arms and shoulders were simply dragged along by it. *Whack!*

I originally thought I merely scratched the ball, but I never would have imagined that the ball would have rode the wind and flew far up, it flew over the wall and lawn, and landed on the baseball field next door. It was a home run. I widened my jaw.

Homing mode was really incredible……

I threw away the bat, which was now installed with a automatic homing device and acceleration booster, and began to run.

As I passed second base I turned to look at the bench. Haruhi’s hands were raised up and when our eyes met, she quickly turned away. You ought to celebrate wildly like Tsuruya-san and my sister! I saw Taniguchi and Kunikida looking shocked once again, while Asahina-san and Koizumi remained speechless, and our opponents simply exchanged glances with each other.

I felt really sorry for them, but the shock suffered by our opponents refused to wear out.

Next, my sister walked shakily towards the batter's box. As the helmet was too big for her, nearly half of her face was covered up, so I can't really blame her for not being able to maintain her balance. This trump card I specifically kept just for losing now swung her bat hitting the pitcher's ball, and whacked the ball over the fence. In other words, she too has hit a home run.

No matter how crazy things get, there was a limit to ridiculousness. For an 11-year-old fifth grade schoolgirl to whack a ball, which was thrown by a college student at the speed of 130 km/h (according to my instincts), over the fence - in reality it was just plain impossible.

"That's amazing!"

Haruhi never doubted this twisted reality one little bit. She took my sister's hand and danced wildly with her and smiled merrily,

"That's an incredible talent! You have a bright future ahead! You'll be in the Baseball League in no time!"

My sister let Haruhi swing her around madly while screaming joyously.

How should I say this? ……Hmm, the score was now 9-3.

I was now sitting on the bench and wrapping my head with my hands.

Our home run onslaught continued. The score was now 9-7. Seven continuous home runs in one inning, I guess we've set a new tournament record.

After hitting a blast, Taniguchi ran back to the bench saying,

"I've decided to join the Baseball Team. I never knew I had it in me, I feel that entering Koushien is no longer a dream. I even felt that it was the bat itself that hit the ball!"

Next to him, Kunikida also naively said, "Yeah, that's true!"

They sure looked excited, while Tsuruya-san slapped the shoulder of Asahina-san, who suddenly felt nervous for no reason, while laughing loudly. I'm glad the three of them are so simple minded.

"Now's the time to really show them our colors!"

Haruhi lifted the bat and said. Shouldn't this be the pitcher's line?

I was beginning to grow tired of the whacking noises, as the balls kept flying towards the scoreboard and bouncing off of it.

It was now 9-8. Until now, the opponent has switched three pitchers. I'm sure they didn't want my sympathy, but I still decided to pity them. Poor guys.

The batting order rotated once again, and Asahina-san, Nagato and I all made consecutive home runs. Finally the score was reversed 9-11 in our favor. *Eleven consecutive home runs……* I began to think that this needs to be stopped quickly, since I've discovered that our opponents weren't looking at us, instead their gazes were concentrated on this baseball bat. Could they have mistaken this for some magic bat? Though it was natural for them to think that way.

Before handing the bat to my sister the next batter, I brought Nagato, who was reading her book at the corner of the bench, out for a talk.

"This is enough."

I said. It was rare to see Nagato's expressionless eyes blinking many times, she normally blinks every ten seconds or so.

"I see."

She replied, then placed her tiny fingers over the tip of the bat I was holding and quickly chanted something. I couldn't hear what was being said, but even if I did, I wouldn't be able to understand anyway.

After quickly withdrawing her fingers from the bat, Nagato said nothing and quietly returned to her position on the bench and opened her book again.

Argh!

When my sister, Koizumi and Kunikida went up to strike again, it was as though their previous home runs never happened, as they all missed the ball and were all struck out consecutively. In fact, this was all due to cheating through advanced technology.

I forgot to mention, there's a time limit of ninety minutes for the games in this tournament, this rule was inevitable if the organizers wanted to complete all the matches within the day. And so, there would be no next inning for this game. We'll win this game if it ends at the second half of the fourth inning.

Must we really win this?

"We have to," Koizumi said, "My colleagues have called, they say thanks to our efforts, the Sealed Dimension seems to have ceased expanding. Though it may have stopped growing, the

‘Avatars’ are still there, so we still need to think of an idea to clean up this mess. But it’s definitely good news that the Sealed Dimension has stopped expanding,”

However, if our opponents managed to turn things around, we would all meet our Waterloo. I was not prepared to use my imagination to guess what mood Haruhi will be in then.

“That’s why I have a suggestion,”

Koizumi revealed his white teeth, they were so bright I would recommend him to do a toothbrush commercial, and whispered his suggestion into my ear.

“Are you serious?”

“I’m very serious. If we are to keep the loss in runs at a minimum, this is the only way.”

I have to exclaim this once again - Argh!

We requested the umpire to allow us to make changes to our fielding lineup.

Nagato would replace Koizumi as the catcher, Koizumi would move to the center field, while I swapped positions with Haruhi and was now standing on the pitcher’s mound.

When Koizumi asked Haruhi to relinquish her pitcher’s position, she pouted for a while until she realized that I would be replacing her, to which she gave me a complicated look and said,

“……Well, all right then. But if your pitches get hit, you’ll have to treat everyone for lunch!”

She said while withdrawing to her position on second base.

Nagato simply stood there looking dazed, so Koizumi and I had to help her put on her chest protector and shin guards. Was it really appropriate for someone without any emotional upheaval to play the catcher?

Nagato walked in strides towards the back of the home plate and knelt down.

And so, the match resumed. As we were running out of time, I didn’t even have time to warm up my pitching skills. Looks like I’ll have to face my first time ever as a pitcher head on with such short notice.

Might as well pitch and see what happens.

Swoosh!

The ball which I spent all my strength pitching landed into Nagato's glove without any force. Bad ball.

"Be serious!"

The one yelling wildly was Haruhi. I'm always dead serious. This time I decided to try a curveball.

Second pitch. I really wish my opponents could be fooled by me once in a while, but to no avail. The bat swerved hardly towards my powerless ball. It's over. My pitch was just not good enough……

"Strike one!"

The umpire announced loudly. The batter completely missed the ball. A strike was inevitable, yet the batter looked at Nagato's glove in disbelief.

I understood how he felt. His reaction was expected, as my weak pitch suddenly lowered its flight path by about thirty centimeters just before it was hit by the bat, no one was going to believe that just hearing it.

"……"

Nagato remained squatted and only moved her fingers slightly to send the ball back to me. I received the wobbling ball, then went into my pitching stance again.

No matter how many times I pitched, I could only manage a semi-straight ball. The third pitch was wide off the mark - it was supposed to be like that, but after flying for a few yards the ball corrected its route and bent sharply, totally ignoring the laws of inertia, gravity and aerodynamics. It even accelerated as it charged into the catcher's glove.

Smack! Nagato's frail body shook a little bit.

The batter now widened his eyes, even the umpire was speechless for a moment. After a while, he announced not quite so confidently,

"Strike two!"

This was getting out of hand, hurry up and finish this!

I was already beginning to slack off as I pitched wildly without even aiming or putting any strength into the pitch. Yet, if the batter didn't swing his bat, my pitches would always end up as a strike; if he attempted to swing the bat, he would end up missing the ball without even brushing its surface.

The secret lies with Nagato making her incantations every time I pitched. As this secret was so big, not even I knew how it works exactly. Perhaps she did the same thing to the bat as when she saved my life and made the classroom reappear, altering its data.

Thanks to this, I now felt like pitching towards an electric fan. Today's MVP has got to be Nagato Yuki.

Very soon our opponent suffered two strike outs, and their third batter was now one strike away from being struck out as well. Was it okay for me to play such a decisive character so easily? I'm so sorry, Kamigahara Pirates.

I neither exerted a lot of force, nor did I made any special considerations as I threw my final pitch towards the pale-faced batter.

The ball changed course and flew towards the strike zone. The batter swung his bat with all his might. The ball changed direction again and became a rising fastball. The bat swerved around again, leaving a residual image in the air. Three strike outs. Phew, it's finally over…… Or not.

"!"

The ball kept bouncing towards the netting behind the catcher. Maybe the pitch was too smooth and went slightly out of control after bending. It tapped off Nagato's glove, and the magic ball (according to me anyway) bounced up like a foul ball behind home plate and rolled at an impossible angle.

A wild pitch.

The batter took this golden opportunity and sprinted quickly. Yet Nagato still held her glove and remain fixed on her position squatting aimlessly.

"Nagato! Go pick up the ball!"

Nagato looked expressionlessly at me giving a command, and she slowly stood up and walked towards the rolling ball. The batter has stepped on first base and was about to get into second base.

"Hurry!"

Haruhi stood at second base waving her glove frantically.

Nagato finally caught up with the ball and picked up the soft baseball as though she were examining a turtle egg, and turned to look at me.

"Second base!"

I pointed to the direction behind me, where Haruhi was yelling. Nagato nodded "slightly" at me in centimeters……

Swoosh! A white beam flashed past my head, taking a few strands of my hair. I then saw the glove fly off from Haruhi's hand. The ball remained squeezed inside the glove as it flew towards center field. I then realized Nagato had merely moved her wrist a little when she threw that.

After seeing the glove vanish suddenly from her hand, Haruhi widened her eyes. As for the batter, perhaps the sight was just too horrifying for him, he was lying on all fours before he reached second base.

Koizumi the center fielder picked up the glove and took out the ball, then walked over carrying that universal smile of his. He then touched the ball on the batter, while apologizing at the same time,

"I'm really sorry. We just happen to be quite a disorganized group,"

Don't include me in that illogical group as well. I thought as I sighed deeply.

The game was over.

The players of the Kamigahara Pirates all broke into tears. I wasn't sure what was going on, maybe they were worried about being berated by their team's graduated seniors? Or perhaps they were just gutted at losing to what was mostly a female rag-tag high school squad that even has an elementary schoolgirl in it? Or maybe it's even both?

On the other hand, without even standing in the shoes of the vanquished, Haruhi looked absolutely delighted. She carried a bright smile like the one she had when deciding to create the SOS Brigade and said,

"We'll go on all the way, and then march into the Summer Koushien! Being the national champion is no longer a dream!"

She shouted seriously. Only Taniguchi cheered with her. I wasn't about to break any more sweat, and I'm sure the High School Baseball Federation must be feeling the same.

"Great work,"

Koizumi suddenly appeared by my side. "Speaking of which, what should we do next? Continue with the second game?"

I shook my head and said, "To sum it up, if we lose again, Haruhi's gonna be unhappy, right? That also means we'll have to keep on winning, which means we would require help from

Nagato's magic. It's going to become bothersome if we keep ignoring the laws of physics. Let's forfeit!"

"I thought so as well. In fact, I think I'd better go help my colleagues. In order to eliminate the Sealed Dimension, they're still short of the people required to beat up the 'Avatars.'"

"Say hi to those blue guys for me."

"I will. By the way, I've learned from this matter that we must not let Suzumiya-san get bored again. We should seriously consider this fact."

"Well, I'm counting on you." Koizumi said, then went to the organizers to request a forfeit.

He keeps stuffing me with these troublesome tasks with such a straight face, I really can't stand him anymore.

I went to tap Haruhi on the back as she was forcefully making Asahina-san dance crazily with her,

"What? You want to dance as well?"

"I have something to tell you."

I brought Haruhi to the outside of the field, I never thought she would obediently follow though.

"Look at them." I pointed to the Kamigahara Pirates players, who were all sitting dejectedly on the bench. "Don't you think they deserve some pity?"

"What for?"

"I believe that they have gone through lots of blood and sweat just to train hard for this day. They have been winners for four consecutive years, I'm sure they're feeling a lot of pressure within them."

"So?"

"They've probably got bench warmers crying as well. Look at that guy with the marine crew-cut standing behind the side netting, that's the disappointment I'm talking about. Don't you find that sad? He'll probably never get a chance to come on the field again."

"And so?"

"So let's forfeit!"

I said it matter-of-factly.

“You’ve probably played enough as well right? I don’t feel like playing anymore, honestly. I’d rather we all have lunch and chat together. Frankly speaking, my limbs are shaking from exhaustion now.”

It was true. Because I was running between infield and outfield all the time, I was exhausted physically and mentally as well.

From being pleased with herself, Haruhi now pouted like Donald Duck and stared quietly at me with her eyes. Just as I was about to lose my breath……

“You’re okay with that?”

Yup. Asahina-san and Koizumi, maybe even Nagato were feeling the same way as well. My sister has been practicing with her bat swings ever since the beginning, but if you give her a piece of candy, she’ll immediately throw away the bat.

“Hmph.”

Haruhi looked at me, then looked at the baseball field. After thinking for a while, or maybe she was pretending to think for a while, she smiled pleasantly at me,

“All right then, I’m getting hungry anyway, let’s have lunch! I never thought baseball would be such a simple sport, we won too easily!”

Is that so?

I didn’t argue with her, and merely shrugged my shoulders.

When I proposed to withdraw in favor of them progressing to the next round, the opposing team’s captain wept while thanking us gratefully. I felt so guilty seeing him like that, since we had used some very absurd cheating in order to steal this victory.

As I was about to leave quickly, the captain called me back, and whispered quietly into my ear,

“Say, how much are you willing to sell that bat of yours for?”

And so, besides Koizumi, we were now occupying the corner of a restaurant as we munched away at our food.

My sister has already got herself entangled with Haruhi and Asahina-san, as she sat between the two of them while eating her hamburger by picking it up with her knife haphazardously; while Taniguchi and Kunikida were seriously discussing about joining the Baseball Team. Sigh, I'd best leave them alone. Meanwhile, Tsuruya-san has now turned her attention towards Nagato, "So you're Nagato Yuki-chan? Mikuru tells me a lot about you." Yet her silent under-classman paid no heed to Tsuruya-san and concentrated on munching her club sandwich.

As though she was about to make an important speech, Haruhi announced to everyone that I would be paying. I have never quite understood why Haruhi would have such wild ideas. I've have never really managed to grasp how her mind works, so I'm not exactly surprised at what's happening every day. I couldn't even be bothered to protest, as it was too troublesome. That's not all, I even felt relaxed as though a storm had finally subsided.

All of this was because a substantial amount of extra money appeared mysteriously in my pocket.

I sincerely pray for the best for the Kamigahara Pirates.

A few days later.

After school, we gathered as usual in a room inside the clubs complex, and returned to our previous lifestyle, as though the baseball tournament a few days ago never happened.

I sipped the brown rice tea Asahina-san, now dressed in her maid costume, brewed for me, while playing Othello with Koizumi. Nagato sat beside us reading her philosophy book that she borrowed from the library, which was as thick as a dictionary. By the way, Asahina-san wore today's costume as per our request. After all, doesn't it just feel better to be served by a maid than by a nurse? Asahina-san held the tray tightly and watched pleasantly at our battle on the board.

This tranquility was no different from before.

And the one destroying this peacefulness, drowning it in the wild torrents of time would always be Suzumiya Haruhi.

"Sorry, I'm late!"

Haruhi apologized insincerely while creeping in like a winter drift.

The sparkling grin that she wears on her face just gives me the creeps. For some reason, every time she smiles like that, I would sense a scheme from her that would make me even more exhausted physically and mentally. What an incredible world.

Just as I expected, Haruhi asked ambiguously, "Which is better?"

I placed down my black Othello piece on the board, and after flipping over two of Koizumi's white pieces, I said,

"What do you mean which?"

"These."

I reluctantly received two pieces of paper Haruhi handed me.

Not flyers again. I took a quick glance at both sheets. One was a notice for a grass-field soccer tournament, while the other was one for a grass-field American football tournament. I secretly cursed the person who took the time to print these flyers from the bottom of my heart.

"Actually, I never wanted to join the baseball tournament, but had wanted to choose from these two instead, but the baseball one was held earlier. So Kyon, which do you think is better?"

With a gloomy heart, I slowly moved my gaze across the club room. Koizumi made a small grimace and toyed with the Othello piece in his finger; Asahina-san shook her head constantly, her face nearly in tears, while Nagato simply continued to read her book, occasionally flipping the pages with her fingers.

"Oh yeah, how many people do we need for a soccer or American football team? Would the people from the baseball tournament be enough?"

I looked at Haruhi's beaming smile and wondered, "Which game requires fewer players?"

Bamboo Leaf Rhapsody

The month of May was already hot enough, but July was just unbearable. The humidity was even worse, raising my unhappiness index to record high levels. There was no chance a cheap high school building like ours would be installed with such high class devices like air conditioning. The sizzling 1-5 classroom was like the waiting room for the bus to hell. I firmly believed the architect had no concept of what "comfortable living environment" meant.

To make things worse, this week was the first week of the July term-end exams, the joyfulness of my heart had gone on to linger around Brazil, not wanting to come back yet.

My mid-term exam results were already disastrous, so I can't imagine my term-end exam would ever have a satisfying result. This was most likely due to me spending too much time with the SOS Brigade, and not being able to concentrate on my studies as a result. I didn't want to have anything to do with that, but ever since spring this year, whenever Haruhi makes a suggestion, I would mysteriously follow her around. This has become part of my daily life, and I'm beginning to hate myself for getting used to this life.

It was after school when the sun shone in from the west into the classroom. The girl sitting behind me poked my back with her mechanical pencil.

"Do you know what day is today?"

Suzumiya Haruhi asked me with the delightful look of a kid on Christmas Eve. Whenever she reveals such a detailed expression, it was the sign that she was probably up to something mischievous. I pretended to think for about three seconds, and then said,

"Your birthday?"

"No!"

"Asahina-san's birthday."

"No~~pe!"

"Koizumi's or Nagato's birthday."

"How should I know when their birthdays are!?"

"By the way, my birthday's on……"

"Who cares about that? You really don't know what an important day this is?"

No matter how important you say it is, it's still a very hot, normal day for me.

"Tell me, what's the date today?"

“July 7th……I don’t really want to think about it, but you’re not thinking of the Tanabata festival, are you?”

“Of course I am! It’s the Tanabata festival! You ought to remember if you even call yourself a Japanese.”

This festival actually originated from China. And according to the Chinese calendar, Tanabata should be next month.

Haruhi held the mechanical pencil and waved it in front of my face,

“Asia ranges from the Red Sea all the way to here.”

What kind of geographical concept is that?

“Don’t they group all those places together for the World Cup Qualifiers? It’s just like July and August, they’re both summer months.”

Oh, really?

“Whatever. Anyway we’ve got to hold a Tanabata activity as well. I insist that this festival be treated seriously.”

I felt there were other things that deserved to be treated seriously more than this. But do you really have to tell me this? I don’t really want to know what you’re planning to do.

“It’ll be more fun if we hold it together. I hereby announce, we shall organize something big for Tanabata every year from this year onwards.”

“Don’t decide this on your own.”

Though I had said that, seeing that Haruhi was looking extraordinarily excited, I knew it was a stupid thing to try and refute her.

“Wait for me in the club room! Don’t go home on your own!” She even said.

I didn’t need her to tell me, I was planning to go to the club room anyway. Because there exists a person that I must at least look at once. Just that person alone.

The other members were already gathered in the club room, which was located on the second floor of the arts clubhouse. Instead of calling it the club room the SOS Brigade rented from the Literature Club, it would be a better description to call it the de-facto headquarters that the brigade has forcibly occupied.

“Oh, hello.”

The one who smiled and greeted me cheerfully was Asahina-san. She is the source of my heart’s comfort, without her, the SOS Brigade would be as meaningless as curry rice without any curry cubes added.

Since July, Asahina-san had changed to a summer maid costume. It was Haruhi that brought her the costume, I have absolutely no idea where she got all these colourful costumes from, while Asahina-san would always thank her intently, “Ah……t…thank you very much.” Today she was still the SOS Brigade’s reserve maid, diligently brewing wheat tea for me. I sipped my tea and studied the room surroundings.

“Hey, how’re things going?”

Koizumi looked up and greeted me. He was sitting in front of a chess board, which was laid on the table, and was holding a chess book on one hand while moving the chess pieces with the other.

“Things have never been normal for me ever since I entered high school.”

Koizumi said he was tired of Othello, so decided to bring a chess board last week. But since I nor anyone else knew how to play chess, he had to play all on his own. He sure looks relaxed even though the exams are coming up.

“Well, I’m not exactly that relaxed. I’m just making use of the time when I’m not studying to exercise my brain. For every problem solved, the blood circulation in the brain would flow faster. How about a game?”

No thanks, I don’t feel like exercising my already exhausted brain right now. If I think of any more weird stuff, then all those English words that I’ve spent a hard time memorizing will be ejected from my brain.

“That’s a pity. Maybe I should bring a Monopoly or Battleship board next time? Ah yes, how about something which all of us can play in? What do you have in mind?”

Whatever, or maybe not. This isn’t the Board Game Study Group, this is the SOS Brigade. By the way, I’m still mystified as to what activities the SOS Brigade are involved in. I wasn’t sure what this mysterious club should be doing. Neither did I want to know, since not knowing anything enhances my chances of survival. So I was not motivated to do anything, that is my perfect logic.

Koizumi shrugged his shoulders and went back to study his chess book. He picked up the black knight and moved it across the board.

Sitting beside Koizumi, with less emotions than a robot was Nagato Yuki, who was busy reading her book. This silent and cold alien has shifted her interests from translated novels to original

foreign-language novels. Right now she was reading a book, whose cover was scribbled in a language I could not recognize, like one of those old, thick magical spell books. I guessed it must be written in ancient Etruscan or some other strange language. I'm sure Nagato would have no problem reading those Linear A stone tablets.

I pulled out a foldable chair and sat on it. Asahina-san quickly delivered a cup in front of me. *Who would drink hot tea in such a hot day……* I have no intention of making a complaint which would incur the wrath of the heavens, and sipped my wheat tea with a sense of gratefulness. Hmm, it's boiling hot.

Standing in the corner of the room was an electric fan which Haruhi nicked from somewhere. Yet its cooling effects were like pouring hot water over a pile of sizzling hot rocks at best. If you can nick, why can't you nick one of those vertical air coolers from the staff room instead?

I turned my gaze away from the English textbook, whose pages flickered along the wind, arched my back on the foldable chair and stretched myself.

Knowing very well that I'm not going to study when I go home, I had wanted to see if it would be better for me to study in the club room after school, but I realized that as long as I wasn't interested in something, then there's no way I could ever get it done, no matter where I was. It won't be good physically or mentally to force myself to do something I don't want to do. In other words, it is healthier if you don't force yourself. That's it, I'm not studying. I spun my automatic pen and closed my book, and decided to have a look at my mental stabilizer. The stabilizer which could sooth my cynical heart was now dressed in a maid costume and sitting opposite of me, working out her math problems.

Looking intently at the questions, then scribbling away on the notebook; looking nonchalant while thinking, then suddenly writing like mad as though inspired by something - repeatedly performing these actions was none other than Asahina-san.

I felt so much more relaxed just by looking. I suddenly felt a great sense of pity, as if throwing all my money, apart from my allowance, into a charity box in the street wasn't that much of a problem. Asahina-san didn't notice I was looking at her, and concentrated on studying her math. Her every action was enough to make me smile, in fact, I was already smiling. I felt like I was looking at a baby seal.

Our eyes met.

"Ah, w, what is it? D, did I do something strange?"

Asahina-san frantically tidied herself all over, this made my heart melt even more. Just as I was about to sing my angelic praises……

"Ya-ho!"

The door was violently opened, in rushed the rough girl walking in strides.

“Sorry, I was late.”

There’s no need to apologize, since no one was waiting for you.

Haruhi appeared with a scene, carrying a piece of bamboo shoot on her shoulder. It was a long piece of live bamboo stick, with green bamboo leaves growing on it. What are you bringing this thing here for? To make a bamboo piggy-bank?

Haruhi puffed her chest and replied,

“Why, it’s for hanging wishes, of course.”

Why? What for?

“Nothing really, since I haven’t hung these wishing bamboo sticks for a long time, so we might as well have one now, it’s Tanabata today, after all!”

……As usual, this had no meaning whatsoever.

“Where’d you get this?”

“The bamboo forest at the back of the school.”

If I remember correctly, that’s private territory, you bamboo thief.

“Does it really matter? The bamboo roots are grown underground, they wouldn’t be affected even if the top half of the shoot was cut off! It’d be an offense if I stole the whole shoot though. I got bitten by a few mosquitoes though, man it’s so itchy. Mikuru-chan, can you put some anti-itching cream on my back?”

“Yes, right away!”

Asahina-san walked in small steps carrying a first aid kit, she looked just like a nurse trainee. She took out the ointment, then placed her hand into the collar of the sailor uniform and onto Haruhi’s back. Haruhi bent forward and said,

“A bit to the right……too right. Yes, right there.”

Haruhi now looked like a kitty cat whose chin was being cuddled and blinked her eyes in relaxation. She placed the bamboo shoot by the window side, and calmly stood on the commander’s desk, then took out a few pieces of tanzaku from somewhere and smiled very happily,

“Now let’s write down our wishes!”

Nagato slowly lifted her head, Koizumi smiled cautiously, and Asahina-san widened her eyes. What was she up to this time? Haruhi leaped from the desk, her skirt fluttering with the wind as she said,

“But there are conditions.”

“What conditions?”

“Kyon, do you know who it is that grants people wishes on Tanabata?”

“Isn’t it Orihime and Hikoboshi?”

“Correct. That’s ten points. Then, do you know which stars Orihime and Hikoboshi are referring to?”

“Nope.”

“Is it the Alpha Lyrae and Alpha Aquilae?”

Koizumi answered quickly.

“That’s right! 85 points! That’s the two stars! In other words, you must point the bamboo shoot carrying the tanzakus towards these two stars. Understood?”

What are you trying to say? And just which category did the remaining 15 points belong to?

Heh heh. Haruhi suddenly gave a sly expression for no reason.

“Let me explain. There’s no way we could travel faster than the speed of light, according to the Special Theory of Relativity.”

Is there a meaning in telling me this all of a sudden? Haruhi took out a note cue from her skirt pocket and said loudly while reading along it,

“Just to let you know. The distance between the Earth and the Alpha Lyrae and Alpha Aquila are twenty-five and sixteen light-years respectively. This means it would take twenty-five years and sixteen years to send a message from Earth to those stars. These are the facts - you get it?”

Then what? Speaking of which, you actually bothered to research such information?

“So this would equal the time required for a god to receive our wishes, right? We would have to wait for that long in order to get our wishes granted. So write down what you would wish for in twenty-five or sixteen years’ time! Writing wishes like ‘I wish to have a hunk of a boyfriend by next Christmas!’ is not going to work, because the wish won’t be granted on time!”

Haruhi waved her arms greatly and continued to explain.

“Hang on, if it takes twenty-odd years for the wish to reach there, wouldn’t it take just as long for it to come back? Doesn’t that mean we have to wait fifty years and thirty-two years respectively for our wishes to come true instead?”

“Well, they’re gods. Of course they’re going to come up with something in order to help us. There’s always a 50% off auction sale once every year!”

Whenever it suited her, she would disregard the Laws of Relativity completely and throw them out of the window.

“Now, does everyone understand what I’m saying? There are two types of tanzakus, one for the Alpha Lyrae, and the other for Alpha Aquilae. So please write down what you would wish for in twenty-five years and sixteen years’ time.”

That’s utterly ridiculous. Trying to pray for two wishes to be granted at the same time is just too shameless. Besides, there’s no way we would know what we’ll be doing in twenty-five years or sixteen years’ time. How should we know what wishes we’ll have by then now? The best one could do is wish that their retirement scheme or investment funds don’t go wrong and are working properly by then, I guess.

If Orihime and Hikoboshi were to hear such wishes, I’m sure they’ll suffer headaches. They can only meet each other once every year, and yet they’re being asked to grant such silly wishes. *Why don’t you ask your own politicians to help instead?* If I were them, I would definitely say that.

However, as always, this girl was thinking up all sorts of nonsensical stuff. I can’t help but wonder if there’s a white hole inside her head, since her common sense seems to come from a different universe altogether.

“Well, that’s not entirely true.”

Koizumi actually sounded like he was defending Haruhi. But he said it very softly which only I could hear.

“It’s true that Suzumiya-san’s speech and behaviour are unique, but judging from the present situation, it’s clear that she knows what common sense is.”

Koizumi revealed his usual cheerful smile to me and continued,

“If her thought patterns were abnormal, then this world wouldn’t be so stable. If that were the case, this world would have already become a strange one dictated by very peculiar rules.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“Suzumiya-san wishes that the whole world would change a bit, and she herself possesses the power to reconstruct the world from scratch. You should know very well.”

Of course I knew. Though I had doubts.

“Yet so far the world has not gone completely irrational, this is because she values common sense more than her own wishes.”

“This may sound childish, but,” Koizumi lifted his head and said,

“Let’s take an example, she wishes for Santa Claus to exist. From common knowledge, Santa Claus doesn’t exist. Because considering Japan alone, it’s just not possible for someone to enter a locked house in the middle of the night, leave a present then leave without ever being detected. How does Santa Claus know what every child wants for Christmas? And there’s no way he could leave a present in the house of every child around the world in the space of one night. It’s physically impossible.”

For someone to actually consider these things seriously, they must truly be mental.

“Exactly, so that is why Santa Claus could not exist.”

The reason I rebutted him was because he was standing on Haruhi’s side, and that really pisses me off. So I raised my question,

“If you’re right, doesn’t that mean it’s impossible for aliens, time travelers and espers to exist? Then how come you’re here?”

“Which is why I could imagine, Suzumiya-san feels very uncomfortable with the common sense that exists within her. Her common sense has once and again rejected her wish - that is to have a world where supernatural occurrences are the norm.”

Does that mean her wild thoughts have a slight edge over her common sense?

“Perhaps she was unable to suppress those thoughts, which was why I, Asahina-san and Nagato-san were summoned to her side, and why I was granted supernatural powers. Though I’m not sure what you would think of it.”

It’s best to remain unsure. At least I’m not like you, I’m fully aware that I’m a normal human being.

But I have no way of knowing if that’s a blessing or a curse.

“Hey you! No talking in private! I’m discussing something serious here!”

Not pleased that we were whispering among ourselves, Haruhi’s eyes become triangular shaped as she glared and shouted at us. So we had to obediently receive the tanzakus and pencils from Haruhi and returned to our seats.

Haruhi hummed and began writing; Nagato sat still and stared at the tanzaku; while Asahina-san had the troubled expression of encountering something harder than a difficult math problem. Koizumi said in a relaxed manner, “Hmm, now that’s a bother”, while tilting his head in deep thought. Do you three really need to think so seriously for such a matter? Wouldn’t it be easier to just take it easy and write whatever you like?

……And don’t tell me that the wishes you wrote are going to become true!

I spun the pencil around my fingers and looked aside. The bamboo shoot that Haruhi “stole” was lying out of the opened window, its leaves look messed up as a result. The occasional breeze made a ruffling noise among the leaves, making one feel cool and relaxed at once.

“Is everyone done?”

Haruhi’s voice brought my soul back to reality. On the table in front of her were two notes that read:

“Let the world revolve around me as its centre!”

“I wish the earth would rotate backwards.”

It was full of what a spoilt mischievous kid would write. It would have been fine if it were meant as a joke, yet Haruhi looked so dead serious when she hung her tanzakus on the bamboo leaf.

Asahina-san wrote in her cute and tidy handwriting:

“I wish my sewing would improve”

“I wish my cooking would improve”

The wishes Asahina-san made were just too adorable. She clasped her palms and prayed at the tanzakus that she hung on the bamboo leaf. I think she must have got something wrong.

There was nothing interesting on Nagato’s tanzakus, writing in a very regular font, she wrote abstract monotonous words such as “harmonize” and “reorganize”.

Koizumi was no different from Nagato, writing in a scribbled handwriting, he wrote simple phrases like “world peace” and “fraternal family”.

What about me? Mine was simple as well. Since it’s twenty-five and sixteen years in the future, I would be an old geezer by then, so I guess the future me would wish for the following:

“I want money”

……
世界があたし

“I want a detached house with a garden where I can give a dog a bath”

“Such boring wishes!”

Haruhi declared her thoughts looking astonished after seeing my notes. She was the least qualified to feel surprise by my wishes. In the long term, my wishes are far healthier than one that asking the earth to rotate backwards!

“Forget it! Everyone, make sure you remember the wishes that you’ve written down! The first key period would be sixteen years from now. Let’s have a race to see whose wish the Alpha Aquilae would grant first!”

“Ah……sure, of course.”

I looked as Asahina-san nodded her head with a serious expression as I sat on the foldable chair. When I looked carefully, Nagato had returned to her world of books already.

Haruhi stuck the long bamboo shoot out of the window and then put it in a firm position. She then pulled a chair besides the window and sat on it. She placed her elbow on the window frame and looked up at the sky. The side of her face looked a little bit melancholic, as though not knowing what to do next. She is the sort of person whose mood swings very rapidly, and she was yelling so excitedly a while ago.

I opened my text book, and began my attempt to tackle the exams once more. As I tried to memorize the different types of adjectives,

“……Sixteen years huh? That’s a long time.”

I heard Haruhi mutter under her breath behind me.

Nagato was silently reading her foreign language novel, Koizumi began to play chess on his own, while I was busy trying to memorize my English translations. All this time, Haruhi was sitting by the window and looking up at the sky. She was actually quite a beautiful view to behold if she keeps on sitting there and doesn’t move. At first I thought that she had decided to take a leaf from Nagato’s book, but somehow the sight of Haruhi sitting there behaving herself just made me even more uneasy. I suspect she was probably sitting there thinking of new things that would give us a major headache.

Meanwhile, for some reason, Haruhi looked particularly depressed today. Sometimes she would look into the sky and breathe a deep sigh. This made me shudder even more. This silence was probably the calm before the storm, it’s just too terrifying. The Emperor Sutoku was like that for the first two to three days after being exiled to Sanuki.

Rustle I heard the sound of paper rustling and lifted my head. Sitting opposite of me and working hard on her math problems a while ago, Asahina-san placed a finger on her lips and closed her right eye, she then gave me an extra tanzaku which she took in advance a while ago. Peeping at Haruhi, Asahina-san then retracted her hand and lowered her head with the face of a little girl who had just successfully pulled a prank.

My urge to become an accomplice in crime has now fully awakened, I quickly pulled over the tanzaku Asahina-san gave me and read it carefully.

"Please stay in the club room after today's activity has ended. - Mikuru-chan"

The above message was written on the note in a small and round handwriting.

Of course I would comply.

"That's it for today."

Haruhi said and quickly picked her bag and left the room. She was behaving rather unusual for today. She was like a diesel engine truck that has suddenly become as tame as a solar powered car. Things sure are going fine for me today, I thought.

"Then I shall excuse myself as well."

Koizumi tidied up his chess board and stood up. After exchanging glances with me and Asahina-san, he too left the Literature Club room.

Nagato shut her thick book with a loud thud. Oh, so you're leaving as well? Thanks for understanding……Just as I was feeling grateful for her, Nagato walked towards me as silently as a cat.

"Take this."

She took out a piece of paper. It was another tanzaku. *I can't help you send this to space even if you give it to me!* I thought to myself as I looked at the tanzaku.

Strange geometric shapes were drawn on it. What on earth is this? Some sort of Sumerian language? I'm afraid not even the Enigma machine would be able to decipher the meaning of this message.

I frowned and studied these patterns, which were neither drawings nor words, with triangular, circular and wave-like shapes all over. By now Nagato had turned around to pack her bag, and had left the room already.

Forget it. I placed the piece of tanzaku into my jacket pocket, then turned to face Asahina-san.

“I, I’m sorry, but I hope you could come with me to a place.”

This invitation didn’t come from anyone else, but from Asahina-san herself. I’ll be condemned by the heavens if I turn her down. I’d even jump down a molten iron pit as long as she commands me to.

“Sure, where’re we going?”

“That……um……it’s three years ago.”

I asked for a location, and she answered with a time instead. But……

Not three years ago again? I thought to myself, yet I was suddenly interested. After all, Asahina-san claims to be a time-traveler from an unknown future, though I keep forgetting about that since she’s just so cute. But three years ago? We’re going to three years ago? Does that mean we have to travel through time?

“Y……yes.”

“Sure, I’m more than happy to go, but why me? What’re we going to do there?”

“That……you’ll know when you get there……I think.”

Huh?

Maybe it was the confused look on my face, Asahina-san frantically shook her hands and pleaded with me with tears in her eyes,

“I beg you! Please don’t ask anything and just agree for now! Or I’ll be in……um……it will become a problem.”

“Well……alright, let’s go.”

“Really? Thank you!”

Asahina-san was glad and grabbed my hands joyously. Ah, Asahina-san’s happiness is my happiness, hahaha!!!

Now that I think about it, when Asahina-san declared that she was from the future, there was no one else to verify her claim. It wasn’t until I encountered another grown-up version of Asahina-san that I truly believed her story, yet I still can’t deny having suspicions about some sort of conspiracy behind this. Then wouldn’t this be a great chance to really prove that “Asahina-san comes from the future”?

“So, where’s the time machine?”

I had thought we only needed to crawl into a drawer, but Asahina-san said there was no such device. Then how were we going to commence time travel? Asahina-san squirmed and clutched her apron, then said,

“From here.”

Huh? Here? I turned and looked nonchalantly around the club room, which was empty besides the two of us.

“Yes, please sit down. And could you please close your eyes? Yes, relax your shoulders as well.”

I did as she told me to. I hope I don’t get struck on the back of my head suddenly.

“Kyon-kun……”

Asahina-san’s suppressed voice came in from behind my ear. Such a soft breath.

“I’m sorry.”

I had a bad feeling about this. As I was about to open my eyes, suddenly everything went dark around me. I was knocked unconscious as I felt a strong nauseating feeling as though losing my balance. Before the darkness came, I thought to myself, I wouldn’t have agreed to this if I had known.

When I regained my senses, my vision was inverted by 90 degrees. Everything that was supposed to be standing was now lying flat, when I saw the street lamps sticking out from my left side to my right, I realized I was lying down. It was then I felt a warm feeling by the left side of my head.

“Oh, you’ve awakened?”

An angelic voice said. I was fully awake now. What was that squirming under my left ear?

“Um……if you don’t lift your head……then I would be……”

Asahina-san sounds troubled. I pulled myself upright and confirmed where I was.

A bench in the park at night.

What’s going on here? I was sleeping on Asahina-san’s knees, and because I was sleeping, I have absolutely no memory of it. This is such a pity.

“My legs are getting numb already, it’s becoming tiring.”

Asahina-san smiled with embarrassment and lowered her head. I don't know where she went to get changed, but her maid costume has now been replaced by her North High sailor uniform. There was more than enough time from dusk to late night for her to get changed, as I had fallen asleep for the whole time. But, why was I sleeping?

"That's because I can't let you know the methods of traveling through time, since that's classified information……are you angry?"

No, I'm not angry at all. If it were Haruhi, I'd have already beaten the crap out of her; but since this is Asahina-san, then I wouldn't mind at all.

Speaking of which, I was just closing my eyes and sitting on the chair in the club room a while ago, why was I suddenly in the park in the middle of the night now? And I feel like I've been to this park before. I remember Nagato also asked to meet me in this park the other day, is this some holy ground for queer people?

I scratched my head, there was something I needed to ask,

"What time plane is this?"

Sitting besides me, Asahina-san replied,

"From our time of origin, it is now July 7th three years ago. It's about nine at night, I guess?"

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

She looked serious.

I never thought we would come here so easily. Of course, I wasn't naive enough to believe everything she tells me, I would have to confirm first. I'll try calling the time and weather hotline.

As I was about to tell Asahina-san what I planned to do, my left shoulder suddenly felt heavy. Huh? Asahina-san was now lying her head on my shoulder. An exhausted Asahina-san now leaned on me; what's the meaning behind this?

"Asahina-san."

No response.

"Um……"

"(Snore)……"

Snoring?

I leaned my head forward then turned 85 degrees to the left, and saw Asahina-san with her eyes closed, her lips half-opened as she made a quiet snore. What's going on here?

Rustle……

The bushes behind suddenly rustled. I felt my heart leaping out of my mouth, what was that?

"Is she asleep?"

Coming out of the bushes was none other than……another Asahina-san.

"Good evening, Kyon-kun."

It was the deluxe version of Asahina-san. A pretty young lady, though much older than the Asahina-san sleeping on my shoulder, this Asahina-san has grown fully in every part. While still looking cute, her charm has increased tenfold. I've met her before once, and like last time, she was wearing a white blouse and blue tight miniskirt. This Asahina-san now walked to our front.

"Hee hee, from this view,"

The adult Asahina-san pinched on the sleeping Asahina-san's cheeks and said,

"She looks just like a child."

Looking nostalgic, Asahina-san (big) caressed the sailor uniform of Asahina-san (small),

"So is this how I look in that age?"

Feeling the soft breaths of Asahina-san (small) on my arm, I couldn't move and sat still, looking in awe at Asahina-san (big).

"It was her mission to bring you here, yet from here onwards, it will be my mission to guide you."

Looking like an idiot, I asked Asahina-san, who gave a mature aura even when smiling,

"Um……just what is……"

"I can't explain in detail, since it's classified. All I can do now is guide you."

I turned to look at the Asahina-san sleeping on my shoulder.

"It was I who made her sleep, since I can't be seen by her."

“Why’s that?”

“Because when I was her, I didn’t see myself.”

That reason sounded clear yet confusing at the same time. The charming Asahina-san closed one eye and said,

“Go south following the rail track over there, you’ll come to a public junior high school. Could you please go help the person standing outside the school fence? Can you go right now? And I hope you don’t mind carrying this me along as well, I shouldn’t be too heavy.”

She sounded like one of those villagers in those role-playing games. I wonder what treasure I would obtain as a reward?

“Reward? Well……”

The adult Asahina-san elegantly placed her hands under her chin and thought deeply, then she gave a mature smile,

“I have nothing to offer you, but you could kiss me while I’m sleeping softly. And make sure it’s only when I’m sleeping.”

Such an attractive deal! That’s exactly what I’ve been wishing for. The sight of Asahina-san sleeping soundly was so cute I was tempted to do it, but……

“That’s a bit……”

Whether it was my mood or the situation then, I just don’t feel like it would be appropriate for me. Frankly, I was disgusted at myself for being so rational then.

“Time is running short, I must go now.”

Is this the hint you’re giving me this time?

“Oh, yes, please don’t let her know that I was here. Let’s hook our fingers and make a promise.”

I automatically lifted my little finger and hooked it with Asahina-san’s (big) little finger. Can I hook it for a minute longer?

“Goodbye then, Kyon-kun.”

Asahina-san (big) said cheerfully and walked off into the darkness, she was out of sight in no time. She sure left slickly this time.

“Now then……” I muttered to myself. I wonder when I’ll meet this adult Asahina-san again? I had a feeling she hasn’t changed much since giving me that strange hint the last time we met.

Maybe this Asahina-san who appeared came from an earlier time plane than the one I met before. I don't get it. There's no way I could. Judging from the mood just now, it was possible I would meet many more Asahina-sans from different time periods.

Asahina-san, who I carried on my back, wasn't light, but she wasn't exactly heavy either. It was natural that my pace has slowed down. Her angelic face breathed such soft breaths into my ear that it was almost criminal. My neck felt itchy from her breathing.

I avoided the glances of the pedestrians (though there was hardly anyone else on the street), and quickly headed in the direction the adult Asahina-san had pointed out for me. I think I walked for another ten minutes, the pedestrians on the road became less and less as I walked along. After turning around a corner, we finally arrived at our destination.

East Junior High. I've heard of this place. This was Taniguchi and Haruhi's junior high. Speaking of which, a familiar person was now standing in front of the school fence. I instantly recognized the small figure that was about to climb up the metal fence.

"Hey!"

After yelling, I felt surprised. How did I know who this person was? This was too incredible. I looked at that person's back, the height was much shorter, while the dark straight hair was neither long nor short.

Of course, there was only one person who I knew would sneak out at night and scale the school fence.

"What?"

It was now that I truly began to feel that I was now face to face with a past reality three years ago. No kidding, it seems like I've really traveled three years back in time.

Leaning by the fence, the face that turned and looked at me was indeed younger than the commander of the SOS Brigade that I know. Yet there was no mistaking that pair of glittering eyes, those were Haruhi's eyes. Even if she dressed casually in a T-shirt and pair of shorts, she still looked the same to me. Three years ago, Haruhi was in her first year of junior high. Could she be the person Asahina-san wanted me to help?

"Who are you? A sex criminal? Or a kidnapper? At any case, you look suspicious."

The blurry street lamps showered the street in a dim white light. I could not clearly make out Haruhi's expression, yet Haruhi, the first year junior high student, was now looking at me with eyes that has seen something suspicious. Who looked more suspicious? A girl trying to scale the school fence in the middle of the night? Or me who was loitering around carrying a sleeping girl? I really don't feel like giving this question any thought.

“You’re the one looking suspicious instead. What’re you doing here then?”

“What else would I be here for? To illegally enter the premises, of course.”

Don’t openly declare your criminal intentions like that, there’s a limit to being shameless!

“You came just in time. I don’t know you, but if you’re free, then help me out a bit! Or I’ll call the cops.”

I should be the one calling the cops, but I’ve already promised the other Asahina-san. On the other hand, why do I always find the existence known as Suzumiya Haruhi clinging on to me? Even here in this time period?

Haruhi leaped to the inside of the fence and opened the lock on the fence with a key. Where’d you get those keys from?

“I stole them when no one was looking. It was too easy.”

She was truly a pickpocket. Haruhi slowly slide open the metal fence and waved at me. I walked towards the little girl, who was one head shorter than her future self three years later, holding Asahina-san up properly.

Next to the entrance of East Junior High was the track field. The school complex was opposite us. Haruhi started to walk diagonally across the dark track field.

It’s good that it was so dark, since she wasn’t able to see clearly my face or Asahina-san’s. In three years time, Haruhi would never have thought that she had met me and Asahina-san while she was in her first year of junior high. So it was good this way, or it’ll become troublesome.

Haruhi went straight to the corner of the track field and led me to the back of the sports equipment storage. Inside was a rusty wagon, and a chalk-drawing machine hanging behind its wheels, as well as a few bags of chalk powder.

“I had these hidden beforehand in the storage house during the evening, pretty clever huh?”

Haruhi beamed, she then carried the bag of chalk powder, which was nearly as heavy as her, onto the wagon and pushed the handle. The way she slowly pushes the wagon made me realize how young she really was. I guess junior high students are still more or less kids in their first year.

I carefully placed the sleeping Asahina-san down and let her lean against the wall of the storage house, please sit here like a good girl for now.

“Let me do it! Give me that thing, you go carry the chalk-drawing machine.”

Should I really be helping her? All this time I have been driven around like a slave by Haruhi, she was like a robot that went astray and won't stop until she has destroyed everything. She was still the same from the past all the way to the present. It seems a person's inherent nature won't change so easily in the space of three years.

"Follow my instructions and draw the lines. That's right, you there. Because I need to watch over you from somewhere afar and see if you've made any mistakes. Ah! You've drawn it wrong there! What're you doing!?"

To be able to order around a high school student she never met before without even flustering, there's no doubt this is indeed Haruhi. If I had met this sort of junior high schoolgirl for the first time, I probably would have thought she's mentally insane.

If I knew her before meeting Nagato, Asahina-san and Koizumi, that is.

Following Haruhi's instructions, I drew white lines along the left and right side of the track. For nearly thirty minutes, not a single night-shift teacher appeared, and neither did a police car come to investigate after receiving complaints from neighbours.

Could the strange symbolic patterns that Taniguchi said suddenly appeared on the track field be drawn by none other than myself?

I silently looked at the pattern that I worked so hard to draw out. Haruhi now came to my side and snatched the drawing machine from me. She then began to draw a few more lines and said,

"Hey, do you believe there are aliens?"

Now that was sudden.

"I guess there are."

The image of Nagato's face flashed in my head.

"Then what about time travellers?"

"Hmm, it's not surprising if they exist."

Right now, I'm a time traveller myself.

"Then what about espers?"

"They're everywhere, I guess?"

I suddenly thought of numerous red spots flying around.

“And sliders?”

“I haven’t met them yet.”

“Hmph.”

Haruhi threw aside the chalk-drawing machine and rubbed the chalk off her face with her shoulders.

“Hmm, this should do.”

I began to feel uneasy, was it because I said something I shouldn’t be saying? Haruhi looked up at me and said,

“Is that a North High uniform?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s your name?”

“John Smith.”

“……Are you an idiot?”

“Can’t I use an alias for once?”

“And who’s that girl?”

“That’s my sister. She’s suffering from a sleeping disorder called narcolepsy. She’s been like that for some time now, suddenly falling asleep anywhere and anytime, which is why I need to carry her around.”

“Hmph.”

Haruhi bit her lower lip and turned aside, revealing an expression of disbelief. I decided to change to subject.

“By the way, what is this for?”

“Can’t you tell? It’s a message.”

“For whom? Don’t tell me it’s for Hikoboshi and Orihime?”

Haruhi looked surprised and asked me back,

“How did you know?”

"……Well, it is Tanabata today. I happen to know someone who does something like this as well."

"Really? I'd sure like to meet that person. Is there really such a person in North High?"

"Yup."

From now till then, the only person who would do such things is you.

"Hmm, North High huh……"

Haruhi muttered to herself as in deep thought. She was silent for some time like a salted vegetable, she then suddenly turned around the next moment.

"I'm going home now. I've achieved what I came here for. See ya."

She walked off in great strides. Not even a word of thanks? How rude, yet that sure is how Haruhi would behave. Besides, she never gave her name all this time. I had a feeling it's probably good that she never did.

We can't just stay here forever, so I decided to wake up Asahina-san. Of course, not before I returned the wagon and chalk-powder which Haruhi abandoned back into the storage house.

Sleeping like a kitty cat, Asahina-san looked so cute I was tempted to do something naughty to her, but in the end I resisted this urge and slowly shook her shoulders.

"Um……huh. Eh?……"

Opening her eyes, Asahina-san began to look around non-stop.

"EH!?"

She shouted and stood up at once.

"W,w,w……where is this place? Why? What time is it now?"

How should I answer her? Just as I was about to look for an answer, Asahina-san suddenly yelled, "AH!!!" Even in the dark, I could tell that her white face was now paler than usual.

Asahina-san searched herself with both her hands,

"The TPDD……it's gone. I can't find it~~."

Asahina-san was on the verge of tears, then after a while she really started to cry. She looked just like a kid that got lost as she rubbed her hands on her eyes and wept. But now is not the time to adore her cuteness.

"What's a TPDD?"

"Sob~~……That's classified information, I'm not supposed to say……it's something like a time machine. I used that to get us to this time plane……but I can't find it. Without that, we can't return to the time where we came from……"

"Then how did it go missing?"

"I don't know……I'm not supposed to lose it……but it's really gone."

I thought of the other Asahina-san, who was touching her a while ago.

"Wouldn't someone come and help……"

"It's impossible. Sob~~."

Asahina-san explained to me as she sniffed, that every event in a time plane has been decided, so if there exists a TPDD, then it should be with her. And right now she no longer has it with her, then that means it's already inevitable that she would lose it, so it has been decided that she "no longer carries it"……something like that. What's that supposed to mean?

"In other words, what's going to happen to us now?"

"Sob, sob. It means, if things remain this way, we'll be stuck on the time plane three years ago and won't be able to return to our original time."

Now that's serious! I thought to myself, yet somehow I don't feel alarmed. The adult Asahina-san never told me anything about this. I'm guessing she should be the one who took the TPDD away and created such a situation. I deduced that Asahina-san (big) came here to the past just for that purpose alone. For the Asahina-san who came from a further time than this Asahina-san, this was inevitable.

I moved my eyes away from Asahina-san, who was sobbing sadly, and towards the track field. The mysterious pattern that Haruhi thought up and drawn by me looked very scrambled up. The teachers and students of East Junior High are probably going to get a shock when they see this next morning. I just hope that these scribbles are not some curses aimed at aliens……Just as I was wondering away, then it finally hit me.

It was dark everywhere, the school was only dimly lit by the blurry street lamps outside. As the white lines that I drew were so big, if I didn't stand back some distance, I wouldn't be able to see it all.

Which was why it took me so long to discover it.

I reached for my pocket and took out the tanzaku Nagato gave me. On it were drawn some mysterious geometric shapes.

“There may be a way out of this.”

I said, Asahina-san looked at me blinking her eyes while I continued to study the tanzaku.

The symbolic patterns drawn on it was exactly the same as Haruhi’s message for the stars, the graffiti that Haruhi and I drew on the school field not long ago.

We hastily left East Junior High and came to a high-class apartment complex near the station.

“Isn’t this……Nagato-san’s home?”

“Yeah. I didn’t ask her specifically when she came to Earth, but I’m sure she was here three years ago……I guess.”

I stood at the main entrance of the apartment complex and pushed the button for Room 708. A beep sound was heard through the intercom, I could feel the warmth of Asahina-san’s nervous hands through my sleeves. I spoke into the speaker,

“Is this the residence of Nagato Yuki?”

“……” The intercom replied as such.

“Um, I don’t know how to say this……”

“……”

“I’m a friend of Suzumiya Haruhi……does that make any sense to you?”

A frozen-like breath can be heard through the intercom. A brief pause, and then……

“Come in.”

Beep The main gate opened. I led Asahina-san, who was looking terrified, into the elevator. We arrived at the seventh floor and came in front of Room 708, which I have visited once before. I pushed softly on the door, which then opened slowly.

There stood Nagato Yuki inside the door. Everything felt surreal to me. Was it really true that I and Asahina-san had travelled back in time?

Nagato looked exactly the same as I saw her before, which led me to doubt whether we even travelled through time. The way she wore her North high sailor uniform, looked at me with her emotionless eyes, and her seeming lack of body warmth and sense of existence was no different to the Nagato that I knew. Yet, the only difference was that Nagato had recently stopped wearing glasses, while the Nagato here wore one just as I had first met her.

This Nagato wore on her face a pair of glasses which I had no idea when the present Nagato stopped wearing.

"Hey!" I raised my arm and gave her a friendly smile. Nagato was as devoid of emotion as always. Asahina-san hid behind my back and trembled incessantly.

"Could we come in?"

"……"

Nagato silently turned inside towards her apartment. I took that she had given me and Asahina-san permission to enter. We took off our shoes and headed to the living room. It was the same as it was three years later, the place was still empty as usual. Nagato stood still and waited for us to come in. Left with no choice, I decided to continue standing and explain everything to her. Where should I begin? From the first day of school when I first met Haruhi? That's one hell of a long story.

Skipping through the details, I gave her a brief summary of what has happened. Her emotionless eyes continued to stare at me through her glasses. I think I spent about five minutes explaining, though personally I believed the summary for this Haruhi story was nonsensical to say the least.

"……And so, the you from three years later gave me this."

Nagato gazed at the tanzaku that I took out, her fingers hovering over the strange symbols as though reading a barcode.

"Understood."

Nagato simply nodded her head. Is that so? Wait, I've suddenly thought of something that's really bothering me.

I placed my hand on my temple and said,

"It's true that I've known Nagato for some time, but for you it was three years ago. That is, for you right now, this is the first time we have met, right?"

Even I didn't understand what I was talking about. Yet Nagato's glasses flashed as she calmly replied as though nothing had happened,

"Yes."

“Then……”

“Obtaining permission for memory sharing with alternate temporal disparity. Downloading reversible moving time plane data.”

What the hell’s that?

“The ‘me’ that exists in the time plane three years from now, and the ‘me’ that exists in this time period are one and the same person.”

Then what? Isn’t that supposed to be the case? But it can’t be possible for Nagato three years ago to share the same memory as Nagato three years later.

“It is possible.”

How’d you do it?

“Synchronization.”

Um, I still don’t get it.

Nagato stopped replying and slowly took off her glasses. Her emotionless eyes blinked at me. That was indeed the face of the bookish girl that I recognize. It was the Nagato Yuki that I knew.

“Why are you in the North High uniform? Have you already started school?”

“No, right now I’m on stand-by mode.”

“Stand-by……you intend to stand-by for three years?”

“Yes.”

“That’s really……”

Patient of you. Don’t you find it boring? Nagato shook her head and said,

“This is a mission.”

Her clear eyes looked straight at me,

“There is more than one way to move through time.”

Nagato said with her blank expression,

“TPDD is only a tool for controlling spacetime, it contains uncertainties and inaccuracies. Many theories exist for movement through the spacetime continuum.”

Asahina-san once again grabbed my hand tightly,

“Um…..what does that mean?”

“Using TPDD to transfer organic lifeforms through time is allowed, but it will generate noise. For us, that is not an ideal tool.”

When you say “us” do you mean the Integrated Data Sentient Entity?

“Can Nagato-san perform a leap through time planes in its complete form?”

“Form is not necessary. It is enough for time travel as long as it contains the same data.”

Shuttling back and forth between past, present and future huh?

If Asahina-san can do it, then it wouldn’t be hard at all for Nagato. Since Nagato possesses adequate powers to do so. I started to wonder, when compared with Nagato and Koizumi, wouldn’t that make Asahina-san an outsider?

“Then it’s fine.”

I interrupted Asahina-san and Nagato’s conversation, now is not to time to discuss the theories and workings on time travel. The question now is what we should do so that I and Asahina-san can return to the future three years later.

Yet, Nagato simply nodded her head again and said,

“It can be done.”

She then stood up and opened the paper door to the room which was connected with the living room.

“Here.”

It was a Japanese style bedroom laid with tatami, there was nothing else besides tatami. It looked really lonely, as expected from Nagato’s place. This I could understand, but why has she brought us here to this guest room? Is the time machine hidden inside this room? Just as I was about to ask all sorts of questions, Nagato took out a futon from the cupboard and started laying it flat. She even brought two blankets out.

“I hope it’s just me thinking too much……but you aren’t asking us to sleep here, are you?”

Nagato carried the blanket and looked at me. The figures of me and Asahina-san were clearly reflected in her crystal clear pupils.

“Yes.”

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ｗｗｗ。

“Here? With Asahina-san? The two of us?”

“Yes.”

I stole a glance at my side and saw Asahina-san looking embarrassed, her face blushing red furiously. That reaction was expected, I guess.

But Nagato doesn’t seemed concerned at all,

“Now sleep.”

Don’t be so direct!

“It’s only sleeping.”

Sigh……that’s what I intend to do anyway. I exchanged glances with Asahina-san. She blushed while I shrugged my shoulders. It was us who came to Nagato for help, if she wants us to sleep, then let’s sleep! If we wake up and find ourselves back to where we came from, then it’s quite a simple solution.

Nagato switched off the lamp switch with her hand and began to mutter something. As I wondered, *She can’t be saying good night to us, could she?* The lamp then flickered and went off.

Might as well sleep! I laid down and pulled the blanket over.

The next moment, the lights went on again. The fluorescent tube slowly flickered as the light became stabalized. Huh? What’s this strange feeling? Outside the window was the same night sky as before.

I sat upright, Asahina-san also sat up, clutching her blanket.

Her innocent, child-like face looked troubled, and she looked at me with a questioning glance, but of course I didn’t know how to answer her questions.

Nagato stood there like before as she turned on the lamp switch.

I have a feeling that this wasn’t Nagato’s usual face, it’s as though there’s some emotion inside this one. I looked closely at that pale white face, it’s as though she wanted to express something but was not able to due to some conflict within her heart. If I hadn’t observed her face for quite some time, I would hardly have noticed it. Though I can’t guarantee that it wasn’t just my imagination.

The sound of breathing in could be heard by my side, I turned and saw Asahina-san meddling around with the liquid display watch on her right wrist.

“Eh? It can’t be? ……Eh? Is this true?”

I took a glance at her watch, could that thing be the so-called TPDD?

“No, this is just an automatic digital watch.”

You mean those watches which automatically synchronizes with the standard time? Asahina-san smiled happily at me and said,

“We’ve returned. Our time of origin was July 7th……just after nine thirty at night. This is such a relief……Phew!”

She breathed a sigh of relief from the bottom of her heart.

Standing by the door was the Nagato we knew. If I have to distinguish besides whether she wears her glasses or not, then this Nagato Yuki was the one that has softened up a bit. Seeing her three years later, I finally understood. The Nagato before me has indeed changed a bit since I first saw her in the Literature Club room when Haruhi brought me there. The change was so small that she probably doesn’t realize it herself.

“But, how did you do it?”

Nagato explained to Asahina-san without any emotion,

“Selective freezing of liquefied connected data within spacetime, preserving it until the known destination within the spacetime continuum, and finally unfreezing the data.”

She said some very abstract terms, then paused and added,

“And that is now.”

Asahina-san attempted to stand up, then her knees softened and she knelt down again,

“Could it be……impossible……Nagato-san, you……”

Nagato remained silent.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nagato-san……has stopped time itself. She probably had the time in this space along with us frozen for three years, until today when she finally unfroze the time……right?”

“Yes.” Nagato replied and nodded her head.

“This is unbelievable, to be able to stop time……wah~.”

Asahina-san knelt exhaustedly and sighed.

I thought to myself, seems like we’ve safely returned to three years in the future. I was sure of it just by looking at Asahina-san’s reaction, she was that sort who wears her thoughts on her face. No matter, I’ll believe the reason for how we returned from three years ago and how time had been frozen for now. Right now I can tolerate almost anything, no matter what it is, I can basically accept it without any problems. It’s all good……but,

This wasn’t the first time I’d visited Nagato’s home. She had invited me once, more than a month ago, but that time I only saw the living room and had not entered this guest room, which I wasn’t even aware had existed. So……um, in other words, what’s going on here?

I looked at Nagato, and Nagato looked at me.

……In other words, when I visited for the first time and heard her story concerning data explosions, there was another “me” sleeping in the room besides us.

What’s going on? That was going on according to logical deduction.

“Yes.” Nagato said. I suddenly felt dizzy.

“……Hey, does that mean back then you already knew what would happen? Including me and today’s events?”

“Yes.”

From my perspective, the first time I met Nagato was during the start of the school term when Haruhi thought of setting up the SOS Brigade. Yet Nagato had already met me in Tanabata three years ago. For me, that only happened not long ago, but she told me that was already three years ago. I think I’m going crazy already.

Both me and Asahina-san looked stunned and astonished at this turn of events. I always knew Nagato was capable, but I never thought she could even freeze time. In that case, doesn’t that make her the amazing Wonder Woman?

“Not entirely true.”

She flatly refuted my praises.

“This was a special exception. An emergency. Unless it is very important, this method is rarely used.”

And we were considered “very important”.

“Thank you, Nagato.”

I decided to thank her first, though thanking her was the best I could do.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Nagato nodded her seemingly cold face, then handed me the tanzaku with geometric symbols drawn on it. I received it and noticed the paper quality had worn out a lot, as though it had been left for three years.

“Oh yeah, the symbols on this tanzaku, can you tell me what it’s saying?”

I casually asked. I didn’t think anyone could read some nonsensical symbols drawn by Haruhi, so I simply thought it would just be a joke.

“I am here,”

Nagato replied. I was exasperated.

“That is what’s written on it.”

I’m getting more and more confused now.

“Could these Nazca-like drawings or symbols be some sort of alien language?”

Nagato didn’t answer that question.

Asahina-san and I left Nagato’s home and walked under the moonlit sky.

“Asahina-san, was there any meaning for you to bring me to the past?”

Asahina-san tried her hardest to think, then lifted her head and said in a very soft voice,

“I’m sorry. I……well……um……I’m not sure……I’m like……the end interface……no, the bottom……no, I’m just like a trainee……”

“Yet you’re by Haruhi’s side.”

“That’s because, I never thought I would be caught by Suzumiya-san to join the club.”

She pouted and said. Asahina-san, you look cute with that expression as well.

“I merely followed the orders……of my superiors, or higher up. So not even I know what meaning there is for the things that I do.”

Looking at a blushing Asahina-san, I thought to myself, could that superior be none other than the adult Asahina-san? It was a baseless speculation, but since the only time travellers I know are her and the normal Asahina-san, I can't be blamed for thinking that.

"I see."

I tilted my head and muttered.

Yet, I still didn't understand. If that adult Asahina-san came to drop me a hint, then she would know what would happen to us. And it seems she never told this Asahina-san anything as well. Just what was going on?

"Hmm……"

It's no use getting a headache over this. If Asahina-san doesn't understand it, then there's no way I could understand. Nagato said that there's more than one way to travel through time. Future time travellers have their own set of rules I guess? I hope someone will explain these to me, when everything is settled.

I parted ways with Asahina-san at the station. Her small figure once again gave thanks to me, then left as though it was a great pity. After she was out of sight, I headed home as well, and it was now that I realized that I had left my bag in the club room.

The next day, which was July 8th; for my consciousness, it was indeed the next day, but for my body, it felt like three years and one day had passed since I last went to school. I went to school empty handed and headed straight for the club room, then went to the classroom after getting my bag. Asahina-san came earlier than me it seems, as her bag was nowhere to be seen.

Arriving in the classroom, I saw Haruhi sitting there, looking intently out of the window, as if fully expecting the arrival of aliens.

"What's wrong? You've been looking depressed since yesterday. Have you been picking and eating toxic mushrooms?"

I said and sat down. Haruhi gave a deliberate sigh and said,

"Nothing really. Just feeling melancholic thinking about something in the past. Some memories I had during Tanabata."

I shuddered at once. What memories were those……I didn't ask her.

"I see."

Haruhi turned her head and observed the changes in the clouds. I shrugged my shoulders. I have no intentions of lighting the fuse for this bomb. Anyone with common sense would do the same.

After school, the Literature Club room once again became the underground headquarters of the SOS Brigade.

Haruhi only said, “Throw the bamboo shoot away, it’s useless now.” Then left at once. The “commander” armband looked rather lonely after being left behind on the table. Sigh, tomorrow she’ll return to being the eccentric girl, asking us to do impossibly unreasonable things. She’s that sort of person.

Asahina-san wasn’t here as well. Only Nagato Yuki was in the room, alongside with me playing chess with Koizumi. Unable to resist his “evangelistic” passion for chess, I agreed to let him teach me how to play the game.

I had thought Koizumi switched to playing chess because he was crap at Othello, but it seems I was wrong. He was just as crap at chess.

I took out one of Koizumi’s pawns with my knight while glancing at Nagato, who was looking intently at the chess board with her blank face.

“Say, Nagato, I don’t get it at all. Is Asahina-san really from the future?”

Nagato slowly tilted her head.

“Yes.”

“But I just feel a sense of paradox between heading to the past and returning to the future.”

That was expected. If there were no continuity between the past and the future - if we went back three years ago, went to sleep over there and reawakened in the present, then the “present” that we’re in now should be a different world from the “yesterday” that we departed from. Yet from the outcome, I had given Haruhi an idea she shouldn’t have, and that idea had brought Haruhi to North High, enhancing her interest in all non-human life……there exists this possibility.

If I didn’t travel back to three years ago, maybe everything would never have happened. Judging from the tone of adult Asahina-san, she seems to know more than us. In other words, continuity does exist between the past and the future. This contradicts with what Asahina-san had told me earlier. I can still figure this out at least, no matter how dumb I am.

“As there is no conclusion to the paradox theory, there is no way to prove that there is no paradox.”

Nagato said calmly, giving a strange expression that reads ‘That should explain everything.’ That explanation may indeed be enough for you, but I completely do not understand at all. Nagato lifted her smooth white neck and looked at me,

“Soon you will understand.”

She then went back to her usual seat and returned to her world of books. Koizumi now spoke,

“That’s the case. Right now my king is being checked by your rook. This is sure a problem for me, where should I escape to?”

Koizumi said while picking up his black king, then casually placed the king into his jacket pocket. He then showed his palm like a magician revealing his tricks,

“Well, is there a paradox with me doing this?”

I toyed around the white rook with my fingers and thought, I’m not going to play some stupid Zen philosophy games with you, and I don’t plan to satisfy myself with abstract topics. So I refuse to answer your question.

In any case - there’s no doubt that Haruhi is a paradoxical existence, the same can be said for this world.

“Besides, a king means nothing to us, instead, it is the queen that plays a more important role.”

I placed the white rook on the box where the black king was standing. Queen to Knight 8.

“……I don’t know what’s going to happen next, but I just hope it’s not something that’ll give me a major headache.”

Nagato remained silent, while Koizumi smiled and said,

“I think it’s best for things to remain peaceful, or would you prefer to have something happen?”

I snorted and drew a circle by my name on the score chart.

Mystérique Sign

Unsurprisingly, Haruhi had recovered from her melancholic state during the end-of-term exams, and was once again acting however she pleased. As for me, it seemed like the blue color forced out by that reaction had been passed into my hands like a baton, and I was at the peak of misery. Every exam paper that was distributed made me feel worse and worse. My melancholy was probably shared as much by Taniguchi. In the midterm exams, we were like comrades who would fly right on the edge of the low altitude line together, even when the red mark of failure had us firmly caught in its radar. A person is an animal that wants someone who is at least as stupid as itself around. You can feel relatively at ease if they're around. On the other hand, this is absolutely not the case when you see somebody else relaxing.

Taking her test in the seat behind me was Haruhi, who somehow always had time to spare. Around thirty minutes before the allotted time was over, you could usually hear her sleeping on her desk.

How annoying.

All club activities are suspended during exams, but since the SOS Brigade is open all-year-round for some reason, reopening for business on a day like this is normal, even though no one had asked us to, same as yesterday and the day before that. School enforced policies do not apply to SOS Brigade activities, apparently. This is only natural, since this whole thing has been a mistake from the very beginning. And since this enigma of a brigade wasn't even a club or anything, it didn't matter. That is Haruhi's policy.

Like the other day. Although I had just managed to raise my will to study to the limit, at just the right moment, Haruhi dragged me by my sleeve and brought me with her to the clubroom.

"Look at this for a sec."

Haruhi said, pointing to the display of the computer that she had plundered from another club some time ago.

There was no avoiding it, so I looked. The graphics-editing software was showing an incomprehensible scrawl. It looked like a drunken tapeworm rolling around in its drink in the middle of a circle; I had no idea what kind of drawing it was supposed to be. I didn't know what else to think, other than that it was something drawn by a kindergartener.

"What is it?"

I said frankly.

Immediately, Haruhi responded with her mouth looking like a duck's,

"Can't you tell?"

SOS団

“I can’t. I don’t get it at all. Today’s Modern Japanese exam was easier to understand than this.”

“What are you talking about? That test was so simple even your little sister could’ve gotten a perfect score.”

Her words were really starting to annoy me,

“This is my SOS Brigade emblem!”

She answered, her face glowing with pride, like she had just accomplished some wonderful thing.

“Emblem?” I said.

“Yes. Emblem.” said Haruhi.

“This? Nobody but a permanent candidate for chief clerk, who pulls all-nighters through holidays for two straight months, and retraces his footsteps while taking the hair of the dog, can see that.”

“Look at it closely. See, it says ‘SOS Brigade’ in the middle, right?”

Now that you mention it, it’s not that I don’t feel like it seems like it looks like it, but I would hesitate to say it out loud that it’s not that I can’t see it. Well then, how many negatives did I string together? I don’t feel like doing it myself, so if somebody’s free, tally it up for me.

“You’re the one with the most free time! And you’re not going to be doing any cramming, anyway.”

I was actually brimming with eagerness until just a moment ago. But, now that I think about it, you’re absolutely correct.

“I’m thinking about putting this on the SOS Brigade’s top page.”

Speaking of which, we do have such a thing. But it’s a miserable site that doesn’t have anything other than a top page.

“We’re not getting any more visitors. How disgraceful! And we haven’t received any mysterious e-mail at all. It’s because you got in my way! I thought we could’ve used Mikuru-chan’s erotic pictures to pull in customers.”

Asahina-san’s passionate maid pictures are all mine, and I don’t intend to share them with anyone. This is certainly one of those things in this world that cannot be bought with mere money.

“You may have made this site, but it’s reeeaaaally boring, don’t you agree? There’s totally nothing there to liven it up with. So I thought, ‘How about putting up something like an SOS Brigade symbol?’”

Just hurry up and remove it from the net. I feel bad for those people who visit this stupid homepage by mistake. Since there were no contents, there’s nothing to update. All it has is an image saying “Welcome to the SOS Brigade Website!”, an e-mail address, and an access counter. That counter hasn’t even reached three digits, and ninety percent of those hits seemed to be Haruhi’s.

While I watched as the handmade website appeared in the browser window that Haruhi had launched, I asked,

“Why don’t you write a journal? Isn’t it the chief’s job to put up a task log? Even the captain of a spaceship handles the ship’s log.”

“No way, what a pain!”

It’d be a pain for me, too. To describe a day here, the only things you could write about would be stuff like what kind of book Nagato was reading, how Koizumi won at *Gomoku Narabe*, how Asahina-san was cute today as well, and how Haruhi was sitting quietly with her mouth closed. Having written such unexciting things, I couldn’t think that reading them would be any more fun. Therefore, I won’t do something that would be far from entertaining anyone.

“Okay, Kyon. Make this symbol show at the top of the site.”

“Do it yourself.”

“I don’t know how!”

“So look it up. You’ll never learn if you keep depending on others.”

“I’m the chief! The chief’s job is to direct. Besides, if I do everything then you guys won’t have any work to do, will you? You should use your head a little, too. You won’t become a better person if you only do as you’re told.”

Are you telling me to do it, or not to do it? Which is it? Speak proper Japanese.

“Just do it, already! You can’t trick me with that sort of wordplay. You should be thankful that you have as much free time as the Greeks did Before Common Era. Come on, hurry up!”

The longer I had to listen to Haruhi’s voice, which was like a crow singing noisily at the break of dawn, the more my ears would hurt, so I reluctantly opened the HTML editor, took Master Artist Haruhi’s illustration, which seemed like it had been drawn by a child who had some time to waste, reduced it to an appropriate size, pasted it into the file, and uploaded it without changing anything else.

I clicked reload on the browser to verify the change. It seemed like the unnecessary SOS Brigade emblem had left its footprint on the internet world properly. I took a quick look at the access counter, and as expected, the number was still at two digits. It'd be fine if no one but Haruhi would ever see the site. I don't want it to be known that the one who had made such an awful website was me.

By the end of the day, as the first term somehow comes to a close, so do the days that have drawn out my melancholy, coming to a momentary rest that will begin from tomorrow. That rest's name is said to be the exam break. This preparatory period will last until summer vacation, and is the time when the teachers will probably mark my test papers wrong.

Damn, how annoying.

Feeling both depressed and annoyed, my feet took me to the Literature-Club-Room-Turned-SOS-Brigade-Hideout. At least I could stare at Asahina-san to achieve some peace of mind.

Nagato silently reading a book, Koizumi smiling while solving a *Shogi* problem by himself, Asahina-san waiting on us in her maid costume, Haruhi saying, chattering, screaming, or shouting something incomprehensible, and me having to listen to those tedious words; this composition has been the pattern these days.

Nothing has been happening recently as well, but I have felt like this since the beginning.

With a sinking feeling, I knocked on the door. Hoping to hear a "Yes~?" in Asahina's lilting voice, what came out from the room instead was,

"Come in!"

It was Haruhi's careless voice, and when I entered, Haruhi was the only one I saw. With her elbows on the chief's desk, she was doing something on the PC that she had forcefully acquired from the Computer Studies group.

"Oh, it's just you?"

"Yuki's here, too, you know."

Certainly, Nagato was in the corner of the table with an open book, seeming like she had become a figurine as she usually did. She's like an attachment for this room, so there's no need to include her in the count. She hasn't committed to entering the SOS Brigade, and is officially a member of the Literature Club. But I guess I should still correct myself.

"Oh, it's just you and Nagato?"

“That’s true, do you have any complaints about it? If you do, I’d like to hear them, I’m the chief here, after all.”

If I were to list my complaints about you, it would completely fill up both sides of an A4 note.

“I’m the one who should be disappointed. Because you knocked like that, I thought a client must have certainly come. Don’t confuse me by acting like one, okay?”

I’m taking care so that I don’t accidentally witness Asahina-san changing her clothes live. That charmingly careless person can’t quite remember to lock the door.

And what was that about clients? Tell me what kind of customer would visit this room.

After that, Haruhi looked at me with disdain on her face.

“You don’t remember?”

A thought startled me. She couldn’t be talking about what happened three years ago after Tanabata, could she?

“You’re the one who did it! And without getting my permission.”

Whatever could that be…?

“You put up that poster on the clubroom building’s bulletin board.”

Oh, that. I let out a sigh of relief.

To get the student council to somehow approve the SOS brigade, I made up some fictitious activity plans. After concluding that a mystery-hunting brigade wouldn’t even make it to discussions, we could appeal to the student council to let the SOS Brigade continue by acting as a consultation office for miscellaneous problems. If I had said such a stupid thing to the executive board, we would have been shut down in an instant.

However, I had already gone so far as making a poster by hand. I don’t really remember what I wrote, but I think it had something like, “We accept all consultations.” Since I’d gone to the trouble, I stuck it on a bulletin board I had happened to see. Even if someone did see it, in any case, I presumed that there would be no one deranged enough to come to the SOS Brigade for advice about their problems. This seems to be the correct answer, as we presently have no clients, which suits me just fine.

Still, as Haruhi had remembered such a thing, was she waiting for clients to actually come? It was time to go home for the day, but perhaps it was better to get myself unstuck from here. If a student with a truly strange problem came, things would get complicated.

I was deciding in a corner of my mind, and while Haruhi was moving the mouse round and round, she said,

“Anyway, look at this. Something’s strange. I wonder if the PC’s broken.”

I looked through the side of Haruhi’s hair. What the display was unwillingly projecting was our SOS Brigade homepage. However, it was subtly different from what I had made. The emblem that had been clumsily scribbled by Haruhi’s hand was distorted as if it had been concentrated, and the counter and title logo had just been blown off. I tried reloading, but it didn’t change. It was like abnormal data completely covered it like a mosaic.

“It’s not the PC. It looks like the file on the server is corrupt.”

I don’t understand the internet very well, but I know that much. By chance, I had thought of keeping a local copy of the site to view in the browser, so we could still make it display properly.

“Since when has it been like this?”

“Who knows? I’ve only been checking the mail these past few days, so I haven’t seen the site. It was like this when I looked at it today. Where should I file a complaint?”

There’s no need to file a complaint. The fix is simple. I snatched the mouse away from Haruhi, and then sent the stored top page files to the server, overwriting the data with the same name. I tried redisplaying.

“Hmm?”

The site remained crashed. I repeated it many times, but the result was the same. It seemed like I had somehow contracted a can’t-control-the-computer disorder.

“Isn’t this strange? Maybe it’s that thing, those rumors I hear about hackers or crackers that people talk about?”

“Can’t be.” I denied. It’s hard to think that there are people with so much free time that they would go cracking a site that wasn’t linked to from anywhere and that nobody looks at. It’s probably some kind of error.

“How irritating! Maybe someone’s committing cyber-terrorism on the SOS Brigade! Who could it be? If I find that person, I’ll sentence him to thirty days of community service without having a trial!”

Taking my eyes off of the steaming Haruhi, I turned to look at Nagato who seemed to be wearing opacity optical camouflage. Couldn’t this person have done it somehow? I thought. Although I could internally form an image of Nagato arbitrarily having detailed knowledge of computers, I have never seen her doing anything with the PC. To be more precise, I should say that there’s hardly any scene other than her reading a book.

There was the sound of knocking.

“Come in!”

The door opened during Haruhi’s reply; it was Koizumi. With his usual, excessively fresh smile,

“My, how unusual. Asahina-san hasn’t arrived yet?”

“The second years have more exams, don’t they?”

It was the last day of the term for us first years, and we only had three periods. It should’ve been okay if we had quickly gone home, so why were we all gathering in such a place? Did I have so few friends? And Haruhi, why didn’t you do a counter *tsukkomi* on Koizumi for knocking?

Koizumi left his bag lying on the table, brought out a Diamond Game board from the cupboard, and turned to me with inviting eyes. I shook my head; Koizumi shrugged and started a single player diamond. I really couldn’t wait for Asahina-san’s tea.

Knock knock.

It was the sound of knocking again. This time, I was sitting in front of the chief’s desk grappling with the FTP software. Behind me was Haruhi, throwing misguided and out-of-nowhere requests this way and that, and making me answer those unreasonable demands.

So that knock was the ringing sound of salvation for me.

“Come in!”

Haruhi again said in a big voice, and the door opened. Judging from the sequence of things, it was probably Asahina-san who had come.

“Ah, sorry I’m late!”

Giving a humble apology as she came into sight, a wingless angel, it couldn’t have been anyone but Asahina-san.

“I had tests until fourth period……”

As she was saying the excuse that didn’t need to be said, she lingered near the door, seeming hesitant. She wouldn’t move to enter for some reason, and timidly continued,

“Well, that is… you see.”

All our eyes were focused on Asahina-san. When she noticed that Nagato was looking at her, Asahina-san drew back flinchingly, and then, seeming resigned, began to speak.

"Uh, um… I brought a client."

That client was named Kimidori Emiri-san, a second year student who gave an impression of being timid and neat.

Presently, with her eyes fixed on the surface of the tea that Asahina-san had poured, she was sitting without raising her face. Beside her was Asahina-san, who was seated on an adjacent chair like an escort. She hadn't changed into her maid costume like I was anticipating. It was a bit disappointing.

"So, as for you." Haruhi said, making a face like an interviewer's and twirling a ball pen. Occupying the space in front of the two second-year students, she continued in an arrogant tone,

"What you're saying is that you want our SOS Brigade to look for your missing boyfriend?"

Holding the pen with the top of her lips, Haruhi crossed her arms. Although she was acting as if she were thinking about something, I knew better. She was just holding back and could burst into laughter at any moment.

How could this be? Even though I was optimistic that no one would come, our first counselee had arrived. It would be typical of Haruhi to probably want to jump for joy in this situation.

"Yes." Kimidori-san said, talking toward her teacup.

Nagato, Koizumi, and I were watching the situation from the sidelines. Before the pair of second year students, Haruhi went,

"Hmm."

She hummed artificially and gave me a look.

I was becoming thoroughly resentful of myself. I never should have made such a poster! What could I have written, accepting consultations for the problems you couldn't tell other people… Was that it? All the same, it never occurred to me that there was a student who would take it seriously; wasn't I thinking normally?

Whether or not she took it seriously, Kimidori-san saw the poster about the SOS Brigade's activity objectives, and seems to have mistaken it to mean that we were a counseling office for general problems or a service business that does odd jobs. Certainly, that would be the case if

you had interpreted it literally. Ah I finally remembered; the contents of my fabricated activities were “students’ school life problems discussions, consulting duties, and progressive participation in community service activities.” Presently, not one of those could be related to the SOS Brigade. Aside from disturbing a grass-lot baseball tournament, we haven’t done a thing.

However, having seen the poster I had written by chance, Kimidori-san had discovered our existence, called out to Asahina-san, who was in the same year, after worrying over it, and came here together with her; this seems about right.

So, what could be troubling you?

“He hasn’t come to school for many days now.”

Kimidori-san wouldn’t meet anyone’s eyes, and looked intently at the teacup’s rim as she spoke.

“Although he’s rarely absent, he didn’t even come in on a test day, which was strange.”

“Have you tried calling him?” Asked Haruhi. Her mouth stopped looking like it was going to burst out laughing, and she started biting on the bottom of her ball pen.

“Yes. He doesn’t answer his mobile or house phone. I tried going to his home, but it was locked. Nobody came to get the door.”

“Hu-hu-humm.”

A person who delights in other people’s misfortune is a real good-for-nothing, but Haruhi was emitting such a cheerful aura that she seemed she might break out into a song at any moment. In short, this person wasn’t even a bum. End of discussion.

“And your boyfriend’s family?”

Kimidori-san was talking to her tea. It seems it wasn’t in this person’s nature to be able to talk to others while meeting their eyes.

“I heard from before that his parents had gone to another country. I don’t know their contact address.”

“Ehhh? Could that country be Canada?” Haruhi asked.

“No. If I remember correctly, I think it was Honduras.”

“Ho-ho~. Honduras, huh. I see.”

What is it you’re seeing? I doubt you even know where that country is. Um… was it somewhere below Mexico?

“There’s no sign that he’s even in his room. Even when I visited him late in the evening, it was completely dark. I’m worried.”

Kimidori-san said indifferently, like she was reading from a script, and covered her face with her hands. As Haruhi pursed her lips, she said,

“Mm. I can’t say that I don’t understand how you’re feeling.”

Liar. You couldn’t possibly understand the feelings of a girl in love.

“In any case, it’s amazing how you’ve come to the facilities of our SOS Brigade. First, tell me your reason.”

“Yes. He often mentioned it. So I had remembered.”

“Eh? Who’s your boyfriend?”

At Haruhi’s question, Kimidori-san murmured the young male student’s name. I feel like I’ve heard it somewhere before, but I also feel that it isn’t an acquaintance of mine. Haruhi also drew her eyebrows together,

“Who’s that?”

In a voice like a gentle breeze, Kimidori-san answered,

“He said that he was neighbors with the SOS Brigade…”

“A neighbor?”

Haruhi looked up at the ceiling. Kimidori-san turned to Asahina-san and me, who had tilted our heads to the side, and then to Koizumi and Nagato, but her eyes didn’t meet anyone’s, and she returned to staring at her teacup. And then,

“He’s serving as the Computer Club’s president.”

Was what she said.

I had completely forgotten. It was that pitiful president? I had taken pictures of his sexual harassment of Asahina-san (against his will), and Haruhi, using that as a pretext, acquired their latest model computer (by force), and he was even bullied into doing the wiring in tears; it was the Computer Research Club’s pitiable upperclassman. No, there’s no need to pity him, is there? If he has a girlfriend with such a good atmosphere, it’s more than even. Come to think of it, I wonder where I put that disposable camera.

“Okay, I got it!” said Haruhi, accepting the task easily. “We’ll take care of it. Kimidori-san, you’re in luck! As client number one, you get your case solved for free as a bonus.”

If you’re going to be taking their money, it won’t be a school service activity. However, is this really some kind of a case? This president something-or-other isn’t just simply becoming *hikikomori*, is he? I don’t know how he could be complaining, having a sweetheart like Kimidori-san, but I think it’d be better to just leave him alone to recover by himself.

Of course I didn’t say that; Kimidori-san left her boyfriend’s address on a piece of paper, and exited the clubroom in a pace like that of an apparition that had materialized.

After waiting for Asahina-san to return from seeing her off to the corridor, I opened my mouth.

“Hey, is it really okay to accept that so easily? What do you plan to do if we can’t find the solution?”

But Haruhi just twirled her ball pen in a good mood.

“We can. That president is surely just hiding away with two-months-late May Sickness. We’ll just march over to the president, hit him two or three times, and drag him outside. Totally simple!” She seems to be seriously thinking that. Well, I was thinking the same thing, though.

I asked Asahina-san, who was again pouring us some fresh tea.

“Are you and Kimidori-san close?”

“No, I haven’t talked to her once. She was in the class next door, so I only saw her when we had joint lessons.”

It would’ve been better if she had told the teachers or the police rather than consult with us. No, could she already have talked to them before? And because she had been ignored, she called out to Asahina-san? It’s probably something like that, I think.

There wasn’t any sense of urgency as we idly sipped our tea. Haruhi was unreasonably elated, and seemed to be thinking about accepting grander and grander commissions, and then resolving them. Although it was lamentable how little was remaining of the first semester, these were the circumstances that were likely to force a second round of the flyer distribution project. Just forget it.

Nagato closed her book with a thump, and, as Haruhi would say it, we proceeded with the investigation.

The club president’s solo dwelling was a studio apartment. Because of the location, I thought that college students were probably the main residents here, in this three-story building that

looked neither good nor bad, in a color that just looked well enough that you couldn't say if it was new or old. Its appearance was exceptionally normal. Ordinary.

Holding the note where the address was written in her hand, Haruhi dashed high up the stairs. The other three and I followed the back of her summer sailor uniform in silence.

"Here, right?"

In front of the steel door, Haruhi confirmed the name on the nameplate. The name that Kimidori-san had said was her boyfriend's was inside the plastic case.

"I wonder if we can open it somehow."

After trying to turn the knob a few times to check the lock, Haruhi pushed the button on the intercom. It should be the other way around!

"How about we come up from the veranda at the back? If we smash the glass, then we can get in, right?"

I can only wish she was joking. This room is on the third floor, and we aren't a group of aimless juvenile delinquents. I have no desire for a criminal record just yet.

"I guess so. Let's go to the building manager and borrow the key. If we say that we're friends who came because we were worried, he'll lend it to us."

Pretending to be someone's friend is your specialty. But this club president, even though he's living by himself, he never gave his girlfriend a duplicate key. That's like harvesting just the stem of the eggplant and then throwing the fruit away.

Ka-chick.

I turned around at the cold sound, and there was Nagato gripping the knob in silence.

"……"

Nagato was looking at me intently with eyes like liquid helium. Slowly, Nagato tugged at the door, and the entrance to the room was agape. The air inside was stale, but for some reason there was a chill accompanying it, lurking at our feet – or so I felt.

"Oh."

Haruhi's eyes were round, and her lips a semi-circle,

"It was open? I didn't notice. Well, that's okay. Come on, let's go on in. I'm sure he's hiding under his bed, so everyone, just drag him out and we'll capture him. At the worst, if he resists violently, you may end his life. We'll soak his head in beeswax and deliver that to the client."

Apparently, she doesn't feel an atom of guilt for plundering his computer. Unlike Salome, she couldn't even be bothered to get a container for the head. In high spirits, she pushed all of us into the room, and then saw that the single room was uninhabited. Not a single cockroach. Haruhi looked inside the bathroom and under the bed. There wasn't even a human shape anywhere. This had one-fourth the space of Nagato's room, and just her guest room at that, but compared to that dreary nothingness, the level of life was four times greater. A bookshelf, a closet, a desk that looked like a low dining table, and a computer rack had been left in precise order. We confirmed through the open window that only a washing machine was hiding in the veranda.

"How strange."

While hopping on top of the bed, Haruhi tilted her head in disbelief.

"Even though I thought he'd be curled up into a ball in some corner of the room hugging his knees. Could he have gone to the convenience store? Kyon, do you know some other place where a *hikikomori* would go to?"

So it's been decided that the Computer Club president is a hikikomori then? Could he be traveling around Central and South America on a tour? Or was he seriously hiding his whereabouts? We should have asked the homeroom teacher of the club president's class for the story before coming here.

I was looking at the computer-related books lined up in the bookshelf, when someone suddenly pulled on the back of my shirt.

"……"

Nagato was looking up at me without any expression, and then shook her chin sideways.

"We should leave."

Looking small, Nagato whispered to me. It was the first time I'd heard Nagato's voice today. Haruhi and Asahina-san didn't notice, but Koizumi brought his face close to my ear.

"I feel the same way."

Don't talk so seriously, it's creeping me out. But Koizumi, with a forced smile and eyes that you couldn't laugh at, continued.

"I feel a strange discomfort in this room. It's close to a sensation that I am familiar with. It's only similar, and it feels fundamentally different, but…"

Haruhi had taken the liberty of opening the refrigerator, "Warabi-mochi, found it! The expiration date was yesterday. It'd be a waste, so let's eat!" she said, while tearing up the bag. As Asahina-san was flustering about, Haruhi made her taste the proffered convenience store pastry to see if it was edible.

I also spoke in a low voice, naturally.

“Similar to what?”

“Closed space. This room has a similar smell as that place. No, smell is just a metaphorical expression. Feeling is also good, such that it is a feeling that exceeds the five senses.”

“You’re an esper?!” was a reminiscent *tsukkomi* that I had to restrain myself not to break into. Actually, this person was seriously an esper.

Nagato murmured in a voice that hardly shook the air.

“A dimensional fault is in existence. Phase transformation is being executed.”

I can understand that.

That’s just what I wanted to say, though. If Nagato were to unexpectedly look sad or something, I’d probably be scared stiff right where I stand, so it would be in my best interest not to say it. Ah well.

At any rate, it would be better to withdraw quickly. After signaling to Koizumi and Nagato, I turned my face to the translucent-*mochi*-devouring Haruhi.

When everyone had left the condominium, Haruhi declared that we were dismissed for the day for hunger reasons, and left for home by herself. The case that had been brought in by Kimidori-san was being put on hold for the moment; “It’ll work itself out, eventually!” she irresponsibly said, and stopped thinking accordingly, and the day’s matters all went up in the air.

Looks like she’s already lost interest.

Haruhi wasn’t the only one who didn’t have lunch yet, but I pretended to go home once everyone parted, and after waiting restlessly for ten minutes, returned a second time to the front of the club president’s condominium.

The other three brigade members were already waiting together. The walking dictionary space alien and the argumentative esper bastard had knowing looks, but Asahina-san asked,

“Um… What’s the matter? You said we should reassemble without Suzumiya-san noticing…”

She was looking up to me with a confused expression. When my eyes wandered over to Nagato and Koizumi, my anxiety strengthened. The one who was waiting for me the most was Asahina-san, that’s how I’ll think about it.

“Those two seem to be concerned about the room we were just in.” I answered.

“Isn’t that right?”

The smiling person and the expressionless person nod at the same time.

“I believe we’ll understand if we go back there. Right, Nagato-san?”

Without saying anything, Nagato started walking. We followed suit. Moving past the stairs without even the sound of footsteps, Nagato quietly opened the door to the club president’s home, silently took off her shoes, and advanced to the center of the room.

The studio that was by no means spacious was already full with just four people standing in a line.

“Within this room,”

Nagato began to talk.

“A localized, non-corrosive amalgamation of asynchronous space is independently occurring in restricted condition mode.”

…….

We waited for a while, but it seems that was the only explanation. Even if you’re speaking with phrases that make it seem like you just pulled words out of a dictionary and lined them up after they caught your eye, I, having no dictionary, am helpless.

“What I’m feeling is close to a closed space. The source origin of that is Suzumiya-san, but this somehow has a different scent.”

Koizumi said what seems to be a follow-through for Nagato. You make a fine combination. Hanging out would be good for you. You should teach Nagato some hobbies other than reading.

“I will make considerations regarding that matter afterwards. However, there’s something we should be doing right now. Nagato-san, did this abnormal space cause the president’s disappearance?”

“Yes.”

Nagato raised one hand, in a gesture that seemed to be gently stroking the space right before her.

An unpleasant premonition ran up my spine and stimulated my brain. Maybe I should have said, “Hold it!” But before I could even utter those two words, Nagato had whispered something in a voice that was like a tape running on twenty-speed fast forward, and, in one moment, a change took place as the scene before my eyes flickered.

“Hahi-!?”

Asahina-san leapt and grabbed my left arm with both hands, holding on to me tightly. But I didn't have the time to savor that long-awaited sensation, as I was desperately trying to verify my location, myself.

Let's see, I was in the club president's cramped studio. Definitely not at an eerie place like this. I was not in a wide, flat space, with an ocher haze hanging in the air such that I couldn't see the horizon. Who could have taken me to a place like this?

"Intrusion codes analyzed. This place is overlapping normal space. A phase has simply slipped off."

Nagato explained. Well, isn't this person the only one who seems like she can do this sort of thing? Koizumi, the only one who can go head-on with Nagato in a discussion, said,

"It doesn't seem to be Suzumiya-san's closed space."

"It is deceivingly similar. However, a portion of this data space is integrating with junk information originating from Suzumiya Haruhi."

"Up to what extent?"

"A negligible level. She was merely the trigger."

"I see. So that's how it is."

Asahina-san and I are getting along fine with being left out of the conversation. It doesn't bother me at all. I really should be grateful. As it is, though, I'd be even more grateful if we could return to the original world.

Asahina-san was clinging to me nervously as she looked around at our surroundings. It seems like this space was an unforeseen thing for her. I was the same; my eyes were flying in all directions, observing. Though I could breathe, will it be safe to inhale this stuff that seemed like a yellow-brown mist? The temperature of the floor that had felt pleasantly cool through my socks went right through to the soles of my feet. Whether it was the floor or the ground, the ocher plane continued everywhere. To think that such storage space would accompany a room that was no more than six *tatami* mats large. So this was a cross-dimensional space? Well, I had thought that such an atmosphere would arrive soon. I was calm, if I can say so myself.

"Is the Computer Club president here?"

"It would seem so. This differing space appeared in his own room and trapped him somehow."

"Where is he? I don't see him."

Koizumi simply turned his face towards Nagato with a smile. Like it was a signal, Nagato again raised one of her hands.

“Hold it!”

This time I was able to make it. In all seriousness, I asked Nagato, who had frozen up,

“Could you tell me what you’re doing? I at least want some time to prepare myself mentally.”

“Nothing.”

Nagato answered like chattering glasswork; with fingers curled, she tilted her hand upwards by about seventy-five degrees, and extended her index finger again. She then said a single word,

“It’s coming.”

I turned my gaze to where Nagato’s fingertip was pointing.

“Uhn.”

I groaned unconsciously.

The ocher haze was slowly coiling into a swirl. It was a whirlpool as the particles that made up the fog gathered into one place, grain by grain. I had a feeling like I was a pathogen that had just invaded a body. Somehow, an image sprung from somewhere of how this ocher swirl was taking it upon itself to carry out its duty like a white blood cell. My spirit’s only solace was that Asahina-san’s hand was warm.

“I sense definite hostility.”

The freely talking Koizumi’s voice, however, didn’t make me any more strained, and I had no reaction as Nagato stood like an android that was in the middle of breaking down, her hand still stretched out. Nevertheless, I could not relax. These people might have the means to defend themselves, but I didn’t. It looks like Asahina-san also didn’t, as she was hiding behind me. This was just the right time to want to bring out a futuristic item, though. Don’t you have a ray gun or something?

“Carrying weapons is prohibited. It’s dangerous.”

Asahina-san answered with a quivering voice. I can understand that. Even if [this] Asahina-san had a weapon, not only will she not be any help, she’s likely to just go and forget it on the train. You would expect that she would improve a little as an adult, but when I think about it, [that] Asahina-san was also very much a careless person; she might just be a scatterbrain by nature.

As I was thinking about that, a figure in the haze was gradually displaying the features of solid matter. There’s probably some reason for this as well. I didn’t want to know, but for some reason I understood what kind of shape the ocher mass was taking.

“…Hieee!”

Asahina-san was the only one being frightened. It's certainly not something that makes you feel like you were looking at a pretty sight, and it's something you rarely see in town. Even I, who had last seen it how-many-years ago, under the floorboards of my grandmother's house in the countryside, was silent for a while.

Are you familiar with the insect known as the *kamadouma*?

If you aren't, I'd like to show you the spectacle before my eyes. You'll get to know it well, down to the details.

Because, this *kamadouma* had a length of about three meters.

"What is this thing?" I asked.

"It's a *kamadouma*, isn't it?" answered Koizumi.

"I know that. At kindergarten age, I was a famous insect expert. Though I haven't seen the real thing, I knew how to differentiate between an uma-oi and a kutsuwamushi. That's okay, but what is this?"

Nagato's answer seeped out like a trickle.

"The creator of this space."

"This thing?"

"Yes."

"Is this also Haruhi's doing?"

"The origin is different. But what started it was her."

As I was going to ask what it was again, I noticed that Nagato was still naively following my command.

"…You can move now."

"I see."

Slipping her hand down, Nagato looked intently at the materializing giant *kamadouma*. The dark brown *benjo ko-orogi* was settling down on a spot several meters away from us.

"Well. While imperfect, it seems like I can use my power here."

ん？

What Koizumi was holding in one hand was a red globe of light as big as a handball. Since the last time I saw it somewhere before, I had thought that I'd never see that ruby a second time. It seems like it had come out from his palm.

"My strength is at ten percent of what it would be in closed space, here. Moreover, it seems like I'm not able to transform myself."

For some reason, Koizumi turned to Nagato with the refreshing smile that I'd gotten tired of seeing and asked,

"Was it determined that this much would suffice?"

"……"

Nagato had no reaction. I went back to asking her.

"Anyway, Nagato. What is that bug's true identity? And where is the president?"

"That is a sub-species of data life-form. It is using the brain tissue of a young male student to heighten the probability of its existence."

Koizumi put his finger on the middle of his forehead. He looked like he was considering something, and then appeared to be somewhat concentrating on those thoughts. Raising his face, Koizumi asked,

"By any chance, is the president inside this giant *kamadouma*?"

"Correct."

"This *kamadouma*…… I see, this is the president's image of an object of fear, isn't it? If we defeat it, this differing space will collapse. Am I wrong?"

"You are not mistaken."

"It helps that it was an easily-understood metaphor. In that case, this'll be simple."

But it wouldn't be simple if it wasn't easy to understand. Then let's just say that Asahina-san and I can understand it.

"It doesn't seem to be the time for that, does it?"

Without raising his last word, he put the red globe somewhere with a suave smile, and then Asahina-san was hanging on to my waist, somehow. The way things are going, "somehow" is always how it's going to be.

"Hyoeee~"

Asahina-san wasn't just trembling, she was taking away my range of mobility. Under these circumstances, I won't be able to escape, will I?

"That won't be necessary, I hope. I'll finish it in a moment. I have such confidence, for some reason. It should be easier than hunting 'Avatars'."

The *kamadouma* that had just finished materializing is not just going to be flying away any time soon, I suppose. How many meters can it jump, I wonder. I feel like estimating….. but let's not.

I abruptly said.

"Get on with it."

"Roger that."

Koizumi tossed the ruby upwards and struck it like he was serving a volleyball. The red handball flew accurately, crashing right into the front of the monster *kamadouma*, and made a sound like an exploding paper balloon. It was a stupid attack, but the opponent was stupid as well. Even though I had prepared for some kind of counterattack, the *kamadouma* did not escape, jump, or roar a mysterious sound, rather it just stayed there peacefully.

"Is it over?"

At Koizumi's question, Nagato gave her assent. It really did finish quickly. The giant *kamadouma* diffused to its original misty form, and then continued thinning steadily. The ocher haze that shimmered in all directions was disappearing as well. And so was the freezing sensation under my feet.

As for our supposed compensation, a man in a familiar uniform had appeared. Falling on his back and facing upwards was the Computer Club's president.

In front of the PC rack, his eyes were closed, looking like he had slipped off his chair. He seemed to be alive. Koizumi leaned over him from the side and put his hand on his neck, and gave me a nod.

Nagato was standing before the bookshelves, gazing at Asahina-san, who was beside the bed looking dazed, and at me.

We were in a room of a studio condominium. I wondered where that vast space could've gone.

At any rate, it was all good. Whether it was gray or ocher, I've had enough of being trapped in wide spaces.

"Approximately two-hundred-and-eighty million years ago."

So began Nagato's explanation, a cosmic mystery of electro-magnetic waves, and if I were to break it up and boil it down, it would be as follows.

It was the Permian or the Triassic period when [that thing] descended to Earth, and at the time there was nothing in the world for it to possess. Losing its basis for existence, it settled into hibernation for its self-preservation. Until an information accumulation body with which it can exist on earth appears.

"It did not have the means to exist on the earth. Freezing all action, it settled into slumber."

Before long, humans were born unto the world, and humans gave birth to computer networks. Though imperfect, utilizing that childish (according to Nagato) digital information network as a seedbed was feasible. But it was insufficient, and the thing remained at a half-awakened state. However, an incident occurred which prompted its awakening. Instead of an alarm clock, floating in the net was a single detonator. It carried information that could not be measured by normal numerical values. Data that does not exist in this planet. An alien world's information data. For the thing, that was the physical medium it had been anxiously waiting for…….

Nagato ended her talk without flourish.

Nagato, who was doing something with the president's home computer, displayed the SOS Brigade online site, and projected the damaged SOS Brigade emblem on the monitor as she was speaking.

"The invocation sign drawn by Suzumiya Haruhi is the catalyst. It became the door."

"…It was this SOS Brigade emblem, from before, this thing, this summoning magic circle or something?"

"Yes." Nagato said with a nod of her head. "Converting this SOS Brigade crest into Earth standard, it holds approximately four-hundred-thirty-six terabytes of information."

It can't be. That image data wasn't even ten kilobytes. But Nagato calmly said,

"It does not correspond to any unit on Earth."

"Amazing odds, aren't they? Because, even though it was a symbol that she had just happened to draw, it was a perfect fit. She truly is Suzumiya-san. Astronomical figures are as nothing."

Looks like Koizumi is seriously impressed. However, I was seriously afraid. What was I afraid of?

Most of the things Haruhi does come from mere ideas. Forming the SOS Brigade and assembling the members were like that. Asahina-san, who was perfectly suited to being a mascot character, Koizumi, who had transferred schools, and Nagato, who was there from the beginning. And as it turns out, Asahina-san was a time-traveler, Koizumi an esper, and Nagato a pseudo-alien. She's

already accomplished too much. Actually, Koizumi would say it wasn't by chance, spouting some nonsense like it was because Haruhi had desired it. Even though I'm starting to believe just a little, I still won't go for it. Because I, myself, am a simple, ordinary person. That alone should be enough counter-proof. By Koizumi's theory, it would be strange if there were no electro-magnetic wave profile hidden in me. Though there was supposed to be…

If there was another side to Haruhi's actions that I had thought meaningless, what then? She, herself, does not know the consequence. Like her own original letters, which she had casually pictured in her head, becoming some kind of message for aliens somewhere. Like a cat hitting a keyboard and producing meaningful sentences. What kinds of odds were there on such things?

That troublesome girl named Suzumiya Haruhi, who easily breaks through the walls of probability and statistics, and unconsciously arrives at the correct solutions; I'd be better off if she had made me join the SOS Brigade because she considered me some kind of an errand boy. Yep, that's the thing. That's totally better than thinking that I, myself, have such an idiotic and enigmatic alter-ego. So, do I? Perhaps my background is that there is some kind of unpredictable and unusual ability within me that I do not know about.

Is that why I was chosen? A secret me that I do not know about, frankly, does not exist.

What scares me is the next point.

Who am I?

I shrugged, in an imitation of Koizumi. Ah well, as he says it. I, myself, am the one who understands my own part the most. The long and short of it is, I am the SOS Brigade's only conscience. There is no mistaking that one. My nature differs from that of the other three brigade members. I am in the SOS Brigade for the sake of persuading Haruhi to live a normal high school life. Aside from stopping her unlawful club activities, it is my duty to make her freely disband the brigade. If you think about it deeply, that is the fast-track to arriving at a peaceful world. No, it is the only straight track.

Rather than changing how Haruhi thinks of the world, changing Haruhi's inner world would be simpler and would bother nobody else.

Then again, if I hadn't given her that strange inspiration, there might not have been an SOS Brigade. So let's see, umm, it's a case-by-case thing. Show it somehow, huh. But I don't know what day that will be, and why I'd have to do such a thing.

Let's put that aside for now.

"So in the end, what was that *kamadouma*, really?"

If I didn't ask this right now, the story will never end. In a tone that seemed to be saying that she was really exhaling carbon dioxide, Nagato answered,

"Information life-form."

"A relative of your patron?"

"It branched off in the distant past. Though their origin is identical, these evolved differently, and went extinct."

Or so they thought, but here was a survivor. It didn't have to hibernate on Earth, of all places. I wish it could've gone to bed somewhere around Neptune. It could've frozen itself so it could've fallen asleep.

To think that the development of the internet would become a pseudo-demon's breeding grounds. I suddenly thought of something. Going near the bed, I asked the petite upper classman,

"Asahina-san, up to what extent have the computers of the future progressed?"

"Eh…"

Asahina-san opened her lips and froze. At any rate, it was probably prohibited, so I wasn't expecting anything, but someone else answered.

"Such primitive information networks will no longer be in use."

Nagato said, not sensing the atmosphere. Pointing at the PC, she said,

"For organic life-forms at the level of earthlings, inventing a system that does not depend on storage media is simple."

Nagato's gaze moved horizontally. When it got to her, Asahina-san paled.

Is that so?

"That is… Umm…"

Faltering, Asahina-san looked down.

"I can't say…"

In a whimpering voice, she said,

"I can't affirm or deny it; I was not given the authority. I'm sorry."

No, that's okay. No need to apologize, seriously. I don't particularly feel that I want to know???Hey, Koizumi, why are you making such a disappointed face, is there something you don't like?

To save Asahina-san, I decided to change the subject. Hmm, what could there be, ah yes.

"Something's strange."

After waiting until I had gathered everyone's attention on myself, I continued,

"I was present when Haruhi was drawing that stupid portrait, but nothing was awakened. Why didn't that thing appear around the time Haruhi finished the picture?"

The one who answered was Koizumi.

"As for the clubroom, it's because it had already been transformed into differing space for some time. Varying types of elements and force fields are battling and negating each other, and in contrast, it becomes just about normal. I guess you could say it's at the saturation point. Since various things have already met the fusion capacity, there is no room for further integration."

What a theory. So what you're saying is that, the Literature Club room has become some kind of terrible den of evil? I hadn't noticed at all.

"That's because ordinary people do not have such unnecessary sensors attached. That may be, but as it is, I think it's harmless. Probably."

Ah well. However, though it's good if prevailing temperatures would just cool down, I wouldn't want to be acting strangely or looking for a rope to hang myself with before I knew it.

"No need to worry, everything will be all right. Because Nagato-san, Asahina-san, and I are dutifully working hard so that would not happen."

Are you sure this isn't happening because the three of you are working hard?

Smiling, Koizumi said, "Ah well," then inclined his head as he turned up both his palms.

I turned my eyes back to the computer screen. As I looked at the broken down symbol of the SOS Brigade, I felt uneasy for some reason. Manipulating the mouse to move the cursor, I scrolled to the bottom of the page.

"Geh?!"

The access counter was displayed. It had somehow returned to normal, and was banging out the number of visitors. The last time I had seen it, the number wasn't three figures. Now, our SOS Brigade Site's counter had… Ones-tens-hundreds-thousands…… Turned to almost three thousand. How could this be? Where did it get such exposure?

“It placed hyperlinks on various locations.”

Nagato quietly said.

“This information life-form did that in order to multiply. Exceedingly primitive. Its method was to copy its self-information into the brains of people who saw the sign, and create restricted space. It required as many humans as possible.”

“So then, the people who had seen it… The almost three thousand of them, will end up the same as the president?”

“Negative. The data of the summoning crest had been damaged. The number of people who had viewed the correct information source is not many.”

Though I had been thinking that the server was likely out-of-order, that might have actually helped.

“How many people? Those idiots that clicked such a dubious link and looked fully at that marking.”

“Eight people. Five of whom are North High students.”

So in that case, eight more people are trapped in ocher-colored space? In spaces governed, not just by *kamadouma*, but all sorts of metaphors? To help them??? well, we’ll probably need to go. Koizumi asked Nagato for the addresses of those people (I wasn’t surprised that Nagato knew those things somehow), and it seems like Asahina-san is also intending to follow the pair. If that’s the case, then I guess it wouldn’t do for me to not go as well. Though Haruhi did the worst of it, the one who had discharged this magic-circle-like thing on the net was me, so I’d better clean up my own mess.

And also for the sake of clearing up this guilty feeling.

Setting aside the victims from North High, it seems like we’ll have to catch a ride at the *Shinkansen* somehow for the three other people that had to be rescued.

So.

It’s the beginning of the exam break. The remaining act became nothing but waiting for summer vacation in the clubroom.

As for Haruhi, when I had informed her that the club president had come to school,

“Hmm. Really.”

Was all she said before flying out of the room, and is probably eating her heart out at the cafeteria right about now. Koizumi and Asahina-san have yet to come.

By the way, in the case of the Haruhi-devised SOS Brigade symbol, I had fixed it by pasting on Nagato's retake. I was able to skillfully upload it this time, well, why was that, I wonder? It should be okay for people who see this to stick their eyes onto it from now on. It almost doesn't differ from Haruhi's clumsy illustration, but if you compare them carefully, you'll see that "ZOZ Brigade" is displayed. Having that as the only difference, it was at the brink of whether strange things would or would not appear.

An epigram for the moment: I want to impulsively click the link to an unknown address, but how?

Thinking about such things, I gazed absent-mindedly at Nagato, who had been reading a technical book lined with numbers at the table's edge. Watching Nagato's face, I happened to think of something.

Though I didn't know when this person noticed Haruhi's summoning image, could she be the one who destroyed the data?

One more thing; there was Kimidori Emiri-san, the one who brought this case to us. Just a while ago, when I went to inquire at the Computer Club's room, I heard that the club president had no girlfriend. He said so himself, seeming healthy, though he was troubled about having no memory of the past several days. Not at all having the appearance of having lied, he was decidedly agape when I had mentioned Kimidori-san's name. The president was not some versatile entertainer who could give such a real performance.

I was suspicious.

Was Kimidori-san's coming to the SOS Brigade really, truly, for a request? If you think about it, the timing was too good. Haruhi did her prank drawing, and I pasted it onto the site. Then some people who had seen it were taken to some information life-form in some different dimension. After inquiring about the story from the visiting Kimidori-san, we turned towards the club president's home. And then, somehow did some exterminating.

It was a picture-perfect scenario. The one in the heart of all this was always Nagato. Though that all-purpose alien terminal having done something to Kimidori-san, which resulted in her having brought her case to us, would have been an elaborate method, I wouldn't be surprised at all.

Perhaps she had thought about staging a pretend-client to relieve Haruhi's boredom even just a little. If it was an incident of this level, Nagato could have finished it off by herself without having to involve any of us. Hasn't it been always like that? Without saying anything to anyone and keeping silently behind the curtains, could she have been preventing these strange things before they happened?

A breeze blew in through the window, tossing Nagato's hair and the pages of her book. Her white finger pressed softly down on the margin, her white face lowered; unmoving except for her eyes, which chased the book's letters.

Or… Could it have been Nagato's wish to involve us? Living in a dreary room for years, an alien-made organic android. Only seemingly emotionless, could it be that she also has them?

Those feelings of loneliness one has when secluded.

Lone Island Syndrome

The scene before me is so shocking that I have totally forgotten the pain in my shoulders.

Right now I'm lying on the floor, unable to even get up, as I'm too stunned by what I see. The reason I can't move is because something as heavy as an anchor is on my back, and I can't remove it, but that doesn't matter to me right now. Koizumi, who was above me as we burst the door open and is now lying on top of me, is probably just as stunned as I am. *Get off me!* I didn't even have the wits to tell him that. You can imagine how astonished I was.

How can this be possible? I can't believe this is actually happening. This is no laughing matter. What should we do?

A bright light flashed outside the window. A few seconds later, the sound of thunder roared through my stomach. A true thunderstorm. It's been covering this island since yesterday.

"……How can this be?"

I heard a groan. That would be Arakawa-san, who burst open the door alongside me and Koizumi, and fell to the ground together with us.

Koizumi finally got off my back. I rolled over and sat upright.

I look once again at the unbelievable scene before me.

On the carpet near the door lies a man who has fallen backwards just like I did. He is none other than the middle-aged owner of this mansion, who did not come down to the dining hall this morning. We recognized him by the suit he was wearing, it was the same suit he wore yesterday after bidding us good night. The only person to wear a suit unnecessarily in this midsummer island would be him. He is the employer of Arakawa-san, and the owner of this island and mansion:

Tamaru Keiichi-san.

Keiichi-san lay on the ground with a shocked expression, not moving a muscle. It is absolutely normal for him not to move, because it seems like he's already dead.

How did I know this? Well, the answer was obvious. The object on his chest looked very familiar. It was the handle of the fruit knife that was inside the fruit basket from the dining hall during dinner last night.

I can bet with you, that attached to that handle is a sharp metal blade, or it would have been impossible for it to stand upright on a person's chest. In other words, the knife is thrust into Keiichi-san's chest.

I don't suppose anyone can live if they've had a knife stabbed straight into their heart?

And right now that's the status of Keiichi-san.

"KYAA……"

From the broken door behind me came a small terrified scream. I turned and saw Asahina-san covering her mouth with her hands. Nagato stood behind Asahina-san, who was slowly retreating behind and clutching Nagato's shoulders. Nagato looked at me with her ever calm expression, and then lowered her head as though in deep thought.

Of course, wherever we go, she would be there.

"Kyon, that person……could he be……"

Haruhi seemed to be shocked as well, sticking her head from Asahina-san's side to see what was going on, and staring at Keiichi-san at eternal rest, with her dark cat-like eyes.

"Dead?"

It's quite rare for her to speak so softly, and with a small tingle of anxiety. I turned and was about to say something, only to see Koizumi, his usual cheery smile replaced with a confused look. Mori-san the maid also stood in the corridor.

Only one person, who was in the mansion all day yesterday, was now missing.

A room that needs the door burst open in order to enter, a dead owner, and a missing person. What does this all mean?

"I say, Kyon……"

Haruhi spoke again, her face showing an unfamiliar look of discomfort. I even had the illusion that she was about to lean into my chest.

Another lightning flash, illuminating the whole room. The thunderstorm that raged from yesterday was beginning to calm down. The fierce waves smacked down upon the island shores, creating a terrifying sound effect along with the thunder.

The owner of a lone island, lying dead inside a sealed room with a knife stabbed through his chest, in the middle of a thunderstorm. This is the scene I was seeing.

I can't help but think.

Hey, Haruhi.

Did you create all this?

I recalled the journey leading the SOS Brigade to this scene.

Back to a few days before summer vacation began……

……

……

…

It was midsummer, in the middle of July. The sun was so hot that I wished it would take a vacation for once.

As usual, I was hanging out in our underground headquarters, formerly the Literature Club room, enjoying Asahina-san's tea. Though I had recovered from the results of the mid-term tests, once I started thinking about the impending revision classes, I could no longer relax. At that moment, the only choice I had was to escape from it all.

In the blink of an eye, I thought up various ways to convince myself that the reality I'm in is all a lie. As I pondered which one to use……

"Excuse me……are you alright?"

I awoke from the dream of myself being an alien paratrooper, parachuting from the back of the moon and storming the parliament building.

"You look so gloomy today……is my tea not good enough?"

"Not at all."

I answered. Your tea is still as sweet as honey from the sky, even though it's brewed using discount tea leaves.

"That's wonderful."

Asahina-san, dressed in a summer maid costume, breathed a sigh of relief. She gave a gentle smile, so I answered her with a smile of my own. Your happiness is my happiness. Not even a sage traveling through the most remote mountains could find an elixir as effective as Asahina-san's smile. My mind is now clearer than the surface of Lake Mashu in Hokkaido. I can even hear angels blowing their trumpets……

I felt like spreading my passion to everyone, as St. Francis of Assisi passionately did when preaching to his sister birds, but in the end I gave up. Not because I couldn't be bothered with the use of elegant phrases, but rather at this moment an annoying person came barging in with his melodious tones…

“Hey, everyone! How were your mid-term tests?”

Koizumi placed the Monopoly board he brought on the table while asking me this irrelevant question. Thanks to him, I’ve now returned to the dark side of the moon, hiding in the satellite orbit thinking how to make all these thoughts stop. Why can’t you just play your Monopoly quietly? You ought to learn from Nagato, sitting peacefully in the corner reading her book.

Opening a hardback book as thick as an encyclopedia, Nagato sat on the foldable chair, in her summer sailor uniform. She had her eyes fixed on the book with that glass statue-like face of hers. From a certain perspective, she is a digitized existence, yet she seems to love absorbing physical data. I wonder if there’s some specific reason for that?

“……”

Now I think about it, how can everyone in our club have so much free time on their hands?

School finished early today, classes having already ended in the morning. Yet why is everyone still gathered here? Myself included, but I have a justifiable reason to be here! If I didn’t drink Asahina-san’s tea at least once every day, I’d basically become a zombie. Thanks to that, I usually have to suffer withdrawal symptoms during the weekends.

Just joking. You think I’m serious? It’s just that I’ve learned something since I came to high school - some people tend to take jokes very seriously. I say this from my experiences of the past few months, so I can’t be wrong. One needs to draw a fine line between joking and being serious, or something terrible might happen.

Just like my situation right now.

I opened my bag and took out the ham sandwich I got from the Welfare Society as my snack.

As we count down to the beginning of summer vacation, there has to be a reason for us to gather here……or not. I say that because the SOS Brigade was created without any reason at all, in fact, it was created *precisely* for its lack of reason. It would be even more troublesome if it did have a reason. Instead of doing something really stupid, it’s better that it remains in its present meaningless state, because that way I don’t have to think much.

“I think I’ll have a snack as well.”

Asahina-san, so meticulous that she made her own tea, took out a cute looking lunchbox and sat down opposite me.

“Don’t mind me, I’ve already eaten in the canteen.”

Koizumi declined. No one asked you. While Nagato’s hunger is more about reading books than about eating.

Asahina-san picked up the rice, which had a smiley face drawn with cream, with her chopsticks and said,

“Where’s Suzumiya-san? She hasn’t arrived yet.”

Don’t ask me. She’s probably somewhere hunting for grasshoppers. It’s summer after all.

Koizumi answered for me,

“I saw her in the school canteen. Her appetite sure is amazing. If all the food she consumed was converted into nutrition, I wonder how many ergs that’d be?”

I’m not going to calculate such things. If she intends to lock herself up in the canteen, then she can stay till evening.

“Don’t think so. She said she has something important to announce today.”

I just don’t understand, how can you remain so cheerful? Whatever it is that she announces can’t be anything beneficial to society, can it? Is your memory storage lower than a five inch floppy disk’s?

“Besides, how do you know about that anyway?”

Koizumi said casually,

“Hmm, I wonder how? I could tell you, but Suzumiya-san would prefer to tell you herself. It would be a great problem if I spoiled her mood by telling you before she does. I’d best stay silent for now.”

“I’m not interested anyway.”

“Is that so?”

“Yup, because from your tone, it seems that idiot is up to something stupid again. I don’t know how many more minutes my peace of mind will last, but I’m sure it’s going to get less peaceful soon……”

As I was about to continue, I was interrupted by a slamming sound from the violent opening of the door.

“Great! Everyone’s here!”

Haruhi’s eyes shone as bright as a spectrometer.

“As today we’re having an important meeting, I intend to have anyone arriving after me be treated as target practice for can throwing from now on as punishment. But it seems you’ve all begun to nurture that team spirit already. This is excellent!”

Needless to say, I never knew there was an important meeting today.

“You sure have a lot of free time.”

I was trying to humble her.

“You listen. The secret to eating in the school canteen is to go just before they close. By then the old ladies will scoop more for you. But the timing is very important, it’d be useless if you went when they were completely sold out. So today’s a lucky day!”

“Really?”

For someone like me who rarely goes to the canteen for lunch, this new piece of information wasn’t of that much use, no matter how generously it had been given.

Haruhi sat down on the commander’s seat.

“Anyway, let’s leave that aside.”

“It was you who started that topic.”

Haruhi ignored me and called out to Asahina-san, who was eating carefully with her chopsticks.

“Mikuru-chan, what do you think of when you mention summer?”

“Huh?”

Asahina-san covered her mouth, munching and swallowing the food that she had cooked.

“Summer……um……the O-Bon Festival?”

Haruhi blinked her eyes nonstop at such a nostalgically traditional answer.

“‘O-Bon Festival’? What on earth’s that? Have you got it wrong? I’m not asking you that, what I’m saying is, when it comes to summer, what’s the first thing that comes to mind?”

What the hell are you talking about?

Haruhi said matter-of-factly,

“Summer vacation! Does that need thinking?”

This way of thinking is a bit too straightforward.

“Then what comes with summer vacation?”

Haruhi asked her second question, and then looked at her watch while mimicking the sound of the clock ticking, “Tick tock, tick tock.”

Perhaps feeling pressurized by her, Asahina-san began to think frantically.

“Um, that is, ah……the sea!”

“That’s right! Close enough. And what comes with the sea?”

What the hell’s this? A guessing game?

Asahina-san tilted her head,

“Sea, sea……ah, pickled fish?”

“Wrong! Summer would be over by the time you guessed right. What I’m saying is, we need to go on a field trip for the summer holiday!”

I stared and got more and more pissed at Koizumi’s smiling face. Was this the important announcement you were talking about?

“Field trip?”

I asked slowly, Haruhi nodded energetically,

“Yes, a field trip.”

Maybe it’s normal for school clubs to organize field trips or whatever, but is it really okay for us to have one as well? She can’t be having us go deep into the mountains to search for Unidentified Mysterious Animals (UMAs) that will never be found, can she?

I looked at Asahina-san, Koizumi and Nagato in turn, and observed a stunned face, a smiling face, and a blank face from them respectively. I then said,

“A field trip, huh……field trip for what?”

“For the SOS Brigade.”

“I meant, what will we be doing?”

“Having a field trip.”

What?

Going on a field trip solely for the purpose of experiencing a field trip.

Isn't that the same as saying "my headache hurts", "the tragic play is tragic", or "frying a fried fish"?

"What does it matter? In other words, the means and ends of this activity are the same. Besides, of course a headache hurts, who's heard of anyone enjoying a headache?"

I don't know whether there's something wrong with Haruhi's grammar, or if she's speaking in a different dialect. But the real problem lies with the field trip itself.

"Where do you intend to go?"

"I'm going to a lone island, and it has to be a lone island in the middle of the ocean."

I don't remember ever reading "Two Years' Vacation" as a summer vacation report. Just what on earth did she read to come up with such an idea?

"I've thought of a few locations."

Haruhi's excitement showed on her face.

"I was troubled by whether to go to the mountains or the sea. At first I thought it'd be more convenient to go to the mountains, but the only time to get ourselves isolated in a hillside mansion is during a blizzard in winter. Besides, that's way too hard."

Maybe you can try going to Greenland……no, the question is why must we do such a thing?

"You want to go to a hillside mansion just so you can get stuck there?"

"Well yeah! Or it wouldn't be fun. But let's forget about the mountains! We'll save that for the winter field trip. This summer we're going to the sea, no, a lone island!"

Don't be so obsessed with lone islands. I thought, but I could find no reason for opposition. It'd be useless for me to oppose her anyway, and for this time of year, the sea sounds more charming; besides, there should be seaside spas in these lone islands far away from the mainland, right?

"Of course there are! Right, Koizumi?"

"Hmm, I should hope so. Though it's a natural seaside spa without any lifeguards or food stalls."

I quickly looked at Koizumi, with my eyes full of suspicion. Why are you helping her recite all this?

“That’s because……”

Koizumi’s explanation got interrupted by Haruhi.

“Because the location for the field trip this time is being provided by none other than Koizumi!”

Haruhi stuck her hands inside the desk drawer, and took out a colored armband. She then used a felt-tip pen and wrote “Vice Commander” on it.

“As a result of this achievement, Koizumi-kun, you should feel honored. I hereby promote you to SOS Brigade Vice Commander!”

“I am grateful for this honor.”

Koizumi gracefully accepted the armband. He glanced at me and gave me a wink. Let me set this straight, I am not the slightest bit jealous at all. Who’d want such a weird present?

“That’s it. This is a four day three night luxury tour! Let’s get ourselves mentally prepared!”

Haruhi gave a look saying “That’s all folks!” Thinking we’re all happy with this decision, which was of course, never the case.

“Just a moment.”

I stepped forward and spoke on behalf of Asahina-san and Nagato.

“Where is this island? Provide? What the hell’s this? Why is Koizumi providing all this for us?”

Koizumi, defined by Haruhi as a mysterious transfer student, is of course an unnatural person, and this ‘Organization’ that he belongs to is even more suspicious. Could they be taking us to some secret research lab of theirs, trying to perform live autopsies on Haruhi and Nagato?

“I have a very rich distant relative.”

Koizumi gave a harmless smile.

“He’s so rich that he can buy himself an uninhabited island and build a mansion on it. The fact is, he’s already built the mansion. It just went through the opening ceremony a few days ago, but as no one was willing to travel that far to such a place, he’s decided to invite some friends and relatives over. And this is where I came in.”

Is the island that bizarre? I started to recall the story of “Robinson Crusoe” I read a long time ago.

“No, it was supposed to have been an uninhabited island. Summer vacation is approaching, and if the SOS Brigade is going on a trip, it would be more fun if we go there together. The owner of the mansion seems to welcome us coming as well.”

“And that’s how it is!” said Haruhi.

She gave out a smile that would get us in trouble.

“A lone island! And a huge mansion! This is a rare situation! I can’t wait to go there. This is the perfect stage for the SOS Brigade!”

“Why?” I asked, “What does a lone island and mansion have to do with your favorite mysterious events?”

Alas, Haruhi is already lost in her own world.

“A lone island in the middle of the sea! And a mansion! Koizumi, your relative is really understanding! Hmm, I think I’ll get along well with him.”

The only people who can get along well with Haruhi are mostly weirdos. The mansion owner must be a very weird person.

I couldn’t tell if Nagato had heard what Haruhi had announced; it was easy with Asahina-san, who had stopped eating, with an astonished look on her face.

“Don’t worry, Mikuru-chan. You can have all the pickled fish you want there! Am I right?”

“I’ll try and arrange it.” Said Koizumi.

“That’s how it is.”

Haruhi took another colored armband from the drawer of the commander’s desk. I have no idea how many she’s made.

“Towards the lone island! A lot of interesting things await us there. As for our mission there, I’ve already decided!”

She said while writing on the armband with the felt-tip pen. The letters looked scribbled, but it seemed to say “Master Detective”.

“I’d like to hear what you’re plotting.”

“Nothing really.”

Don’t try to deny it without even flinching!

Haruhi left after being satisfied with her announcement, Asahina-san and Nagato also left the club room and headed home. Only Koizumi and I remained behind.

Koizumi flicked his hair parting and said,

“It’s true. Even if I didn’t suggest it, Suzumiya-san was bound to find somewhere to go anyway, am I right? Since summer vacation is quite long. Would you rather go searching for Tsuchinoko in the mountains instead of walking along the seaside?”

“A Tsuchinoko… ? …Forget it, don’t actually go and explain what it is. I know that much, at least.”

“Three days ago, I happened to find Suzumiya-san in the bookstore in front of the station. I saw her staring hard at a map of Japan while looking through some sort of mysterious magazine that deals with Unidentified Mysterious Animals.”

A field trip in search of UMAs, huh? This doesn’t sound like a big deal, but the scary thing is that Haruhi would actually expect to find something mysterious.

“It seems Suzumiya-san intended to return home with something. I had a feeling she would start with Mt. Hiba first. That being the case, it would be better for us to have a sunbath by the seaside. Besides, I already had somewhere in mind.”

How coincidental for you to have somewhere in mind. On the other hand, however, between watching the girls in swimsuits by the seaside; and climbing the hills in the bright sunlight, the difference is like heaven and hell.

“The key is that this is a privately owned uninhabited island, a so-called ‘closed circle’.”

This I had to ask about. Asking about what you do not understand is the best policy.

“What’s a ‘closed circle’?”

Koizumi’s smile was not that annoying. If it was, then the problem lay with the other person’s eyes. Even I knew that.

“Perhaps there’s a similarity……” Koizumi smiled and paused for a while, “I guess it would be more appropriate to call it a ‘Sealed Reality’?”

I didn’t know how funny my expression was, but Koizumi was giggling.

“I was kidding. A ‘Closed circle’ is a mystery term. It means a situation in which all direct contact with the outside world has been lost.”

Explain so that everyone can understand!

“This is a setting most commonly seen in classic detective novels. For example, if we were to go skiing before the harsh winter……”

Oh yeah, didn’t Haruhi say she wanted to go to the snowy mountains?

“Going to the snowy mountains for a field trip is not too bad, but what if then, the largest blizzard ever on record were to arrive?”

If we were to go there, one would check the weather report first.

“That’s the problem. We’re surrounded by the blizzard and thick layers of snow and there’s no way off the mountain, and there’s no way for people to come up as well.”

Then think of something!

“There’s no other way out. That’s why it’s called a ‘closed circle’. Under these circumstances, something usually happens. I guess, the most common event is that someone gets murdered. So the stage is set. There is no way out for the suspect and the other people, and no new characters can enter from the outside, let alone the police. It wouldn’t be fun if we had to resort to scientific forensics to rat out the suspect.”

As usual, what is this guy trying to say?

“Ah, sorry about that. In other words, Suzumiya-san’s theme for this trip is to be involved in such a mysterious event.”

That’s why she chose a lone island?

“Yes, a lone island. I was thinking, she’d probably conjure a condition in which the island is somehow sealed off, and during this time when no one can escape, someone would get murdered. A hilltop mansion in the middle of a blizzard or a lone island in the middle of a tropical storm are the perfect ingredients for a ‘closed circle’, where there is no way for the authorities to get involved. The ultimate stage for a crime mystery.”

“You seem to be enjoying this.”

Haruhi doesn’t just lose control during the summer, but you don’t have to go encourage her further. And I’m not saying this out of jealousy of not getting the vice-commander armband.

“Because I like such a stage as well.”

I didn’t want to argue with him, but I had to say this, *I don’t like it at all.*

Koizumi ignored my preference, and continued as though reading a thesis,

“Think about those ‘Master Detectives’. Normally, those with normal lives rarely get involved in inexplicable murder cases.”

“Makes sense.”

“Yet why is it that these novel detectives happen to get involved in these puzzling cases one after another? Do you know the reason?”

“Because if they didn’t, there would be no story to write.”

“Exactly, your answer is absolutely correct. These things only happen in the fictional world of novels. Yet to say such realistic things would just take the fun out of it, since Suzumiya-san intends to be in the world of fiction.”

Thinking hard, that was the reason why she founded the SOS Brigade.

“In order to encounter such surreal and mysterious events, one needs to go to a suitable location. Because that is how the detectives in these novels end up in these events. So, one must become a major player on the stage itself. If one desires to have these events come to their doorstep, they must either have a relative who’s a brilliant detective, or they must be a police officer themselves, or wait till they publish a series of novels themselves.”

That makes sense. I know Nagato loves science fiction novels, but I never knew she liked mystery novels as well. As for Haruhi, I guess she probably loves both.

“For an outsider to play the role of a detective, one needs to be dragged unexpectedly into these circumstances, and to solve them in the swiftest manner possible.”

“They can’t just have things incidentally happening to them all of a sudden.”

Koizumi nodded,

“Yes, reality seldom develops like in novels. The chances of an intriguing sealed room murder in the school are very low. So, Suzumiya-san must be thinking of going to a place with more favorable circumstances.”

The idiom “turning something on its head” came to mind suddenly.

“And that location is the stage for this field trip - the lone island. For some reason, most people would find this the most suitable stage for a murder mystery.”

What do you mean by “most people”? Your “most” is probably a minority.

“Thus, strange events often happen where master detectives appear. This is not coincidental, but rather, these detectives possess the supernatural power to summon events to themselves. It is not

the events that draw the detectives, but rather it is the presence of these detectives that creates such events."

I looked at Koizumi with a look as though I had just stepped on a sea slug.

"Are you fully conscious?"

"I'm always suitably conscious. I didn't come up with the connections between detectives and closed circles, I'm just trying to convey Suzumiya-san's way of thinking. To put it simply, the whole reason for this trip is because she wants to become a detective."

What does she need to do to become a master detective? It might be possible if she were to script and direct the whole thing, playing both the suspect and the detective at the same time.

"At least this is better than having to go to the mountains to search for Tsuchinoko or Bigfoot. I only told Suzumiya-san that I know someone who's built a mansion on an island and is inviting guests. Of course, I don't expect anyone to get murdered."

Koizumi's relaxed smile and even the shrugging of his shoulders has got me worked up.

"I'm just trying to provide Suzumiya-san with a little entertainment. Otherwise, who knows what other ideas she might conjure out of her boredom? If that's the case, it would be easier for us to handle things by providing a stage beforehand."

"Us?"

"This has nothing to do with the 'Organization'. Though I did make a report just to be safe. I may be an esper, but I'm still a high school student. Furthermore, there's nothing wrong with a field trip. It's quite normal for high school students. Isn't going on a trip with your close friends something worth looking forward to?"

It would be fine if Haruhi was looking forward to having a normal trip. I wouldn't object if she'd chosen a normal hot spring or a beach near the mainland, but why pick a lone island? This is Haruhi we're talking about, she'd probably bring in two typhoons along the way.

……Forget it, no matter how far-fetched she is, she's not the sort of person who would wish for anyone to get killed, or there would be bodies piling up everywhere in North High already. There seemed to be other important things to consider, so I went into deep thought.

Four days and three nights by the seaside in summer. A white beach, and probably some relaxing sunshine. I think I can endure such a summer, bring it on, Mr Sunshine!

Ah yes, I'd better prepare myself for the mesmerizing sight of Asahina-san in her swimsuit.

The mansion owner was extremely generous in providing free lodging and food for us. We only needed to pay for the return trip from the island itself.

And so we met by the ferry pier at the harbor, awaiting our ferry's arrival.

Haruhi couldn't wait to get going already. We just had the end-of-term assembly yesterday, in other words, today is the first day of summer vacation. It seems that Koizumi's relatives didn't really mind when we chose to go, but to set off right on the first day of vacation is proof of Haruhi's anxiousness. Any hope of enjoying my summer vacation peacefully without ever having to see Haruhi's face has now been shattered. This is all because of the presence of Haruhi, and it is also the meaning of her existence.

"It's been a long time since I rode a ferry."

Haruhi slid her shades down and gazed at the grey sea in the distance by the pier. Her dark silky hair flew in the sea breeze as she stood by the edge of the boarding dock.

"Such a huge ship! It's so incredible, for such a large ship to float on water."

Asahina-san, carrying two suitcases with her hands, looked up in awe at the ferry. She wore a white one-piece summer dress and a straw hat on her head. This made her look very cute. Having the laces of a hat tied under her chin suits her. Her eyes glimmered like a child's, looking at the old ferry as though it were some ancient wooden boat dug up by archaeologists. Perhaps ships don't float on water in her age.

"……"

Nagato's face remained blank as usual, staring at the corporate logo printed on the hull of the ferry. For once, Nagato was not wearing her uniform, but a checkered sleeveless shirt. Carrying a yellowish-green umbrella, she gave the impression of a weak girl who just came out of the hospital. I wish I had an instant camera with me. If I took a picture of this, I could probably sell it for a high price to Taniguchi.

"The weather's excellent. This is great, you could say it's the perfect weather for sailing, though we'll be in second class today." Koizumi said.

"That suits us just fine."

It's not like the cabins are that big anyway. Even though this is going to be a long cruise, we're still ten years too early to have a private cabin to ourselves. This is, after all, a high school field trip.

Technically, this trip isn't a study trip or anything of the sort. A trip just for the sake of having one can't really be counted as meaningful. Usually there'd be a consulting teacher accompanying a club's field trip activities. There is none for the SOS Brigade. This is because we're still not recognized by the school as a formal club. It would be surprising if a teacher had come along. In

North High, you can't even form an association if you don't have a consulting teacher. In my speculation, even if a teacher did agree to be consultant to the SOS Brigade, Haruhi would probably find that unnecessary. Because if she didn't, she would have abducted one already, just as she abducted us.

As I stretched my muscles, Asahina-san walked slowly to my side. Her round eyes became even rounder.

"How does that huge ship float?"

How does it float? Besides its buoyancy, I don't think there's any other way. Don't they teach physics in Asahina-san's age?

"Really? Buoyancy… you're right. I see. So this is what they mean by 'one is usually unaware of their surroundings'…"

What are you talking about? Asahina-san nodded her head with a serious look on her face.

Let me try asking. Just one question wouldn't hurt.

"Ahem……Asahina-san, do ships in the future float using state-of-the-art technology?"

"Um……you think I can tell you?"

Having heard her put it that way, I shook my head. I didn't think so. I tried asking another question,

"There's got to be a sea?"

Asahina-san held the tip of her hat and tilted her head,

"Um, yeah, there's a sea."

"That's great to hear."

I don't know whether she comes from the near future or distant future, but it certainly is pleasing to hear that the earth didn't turn into a desert in the future, that is, if the sea is cleaner than it is now.

I had wanted to get more useful information from this time traveler.

"Kyon! Mikuru-chan! What're you doing? It's time!"

Haruhi shouted loudly, telling us it was time to board.

Speaking of which, I was late for the meeting today. As I was about to leave in the morning, I found my bag to be heavier than usual, so I unzipped it and had a look. Instead of my clothes and bathroom kit, my sister was inside. The night before, she kept shouting, "I wanna go too!", after I let it slip that I was going on a trip with Haruhi and the rest. I spent two whole hours trying to cheer her up, but I never thought she would sneak into my bag. I yanked my sister out of the bag and interrogated her on where she hid my stuff. It took some time trying to do a good cop, bad cop routine on her as she chose to remain silent. "If you don't tell me, then I'm not gonna buy any presents for you! I'll use all that money to buy lunchboxes for the SOS Brigade!"

The SOS Brigade gathered in the corner of the second class cabin, chatting while eating the lunchboxes I bought. Actually, Haruhi and Koizumi were the only ones talking the whole time.

"How much longer till we get there?"

"Judging from the speed of this ferry, I'd say about six hours. According to the plans, they'll be waiting for us at the harbor. Then we'll ride on their speedboat for about half an hour before arriving at the lone island with the mansion on top of it. I've never been there before, so I'm not sure what it's like there."

"I bet it must be a weird mansion. Do you know the name of the architect?" Haruhi asked.

"I didn't ask that much, I do remember him saying he hired an architect to build it."

"I can't wait."

"It'd be great if it could match your expectations, but I'm not too sure myself as I've never seen it before. But for someone to build a private mansion on an uninhabited island, the mansion must be unique in some way. That would be perfect."

Said Koizumi, but I certainly wasn't hoping for that. If the blueprint design was as Haruhi had imagined it, then the architect who drew it must have been awake for three whole nights, suffering from alcohol poisoning, and nodding occasionally while drawing drowsily. I don't want to stay in such a house, a normal inn will do for me. Just a traditional Japanese breakfast for me, thank you very much. If the mansion had a name, Haruhi would probably become a serial killer just to trigger some events.

"An island! And a mansion! There's nothing better than this for an SOS Brigade trip. At this rate, we're headed for a perfect summer vacation."

As Haruhi got more animated, the rest of the brigade could only watch in silence.

Besides rocking along the waves on the ship's deck, there was nothing else to do, so we followed Koizumi's suggestion and played Go Fish. Koizumi, who lost from start to finish, had to buy drinks for the five of us. I collected my drink and drank silently.

I just couldn't help but have a bad feeling about this lone island awaiting us. Asahina-san seemed to feel the same as well.

Haruhi said after finishing her juice in two gulps,

"Mikuru-chan, you look terrible, are you seasick?"

"No……that……ah, maybe."

Asahina-san replied, Haruhi then said,

"That won't do, you'd better get some fresh air. It's great enjoying the sea breeze out on the deck. C'mon, let's go!"

She then grabbed Asahina-san's hand and smiled,

"Don't worry, I won't push you into the sea. Hmm……though that's not a bad idea. The sudden disappearance of a female passenger."

"Eh!?"

Haruhi slapped Asahina-san's stiffened shoulders.

"Just kidding! That wouldn't be fun at all. It'd be exciting if the ship were to hit an iceberg or get attacked by a giant squid. I'm not the sort that likes to get everyone in trouble just so I can have fun!"

I think I'd better check where the lifeboats are located. Of course, I don't suppose an iceberg would come that near to the seas of Japan in the middle of summer, but it's possible that unknown marine creatures might attack suddenly. I glared at Koizumi: *If a monster attacks, we're counting on you!* I don't know how he read my thoughts, but he replied with a smile, while Nagato just stared at the wall.

Haruhi continued endlessly,

"The best events are of course left for the island! Koizumi, will I be disappointed?"

"There's no exact definition of what constitutes an event."

Koizumi said smoothly,

"I, too, am hoping for an enjoyable trip."

Koizumi revealed an enigmatic smile. Though this was his usual expression, I stared hard at the esper, trying to figure out what was behind that smiling mask. I soon gave up. This guy's smile is

like Nagato's blank expression - impossible to read anything from. Really, he ought to show more emotion as well. Of course, not as blatantly as Haruhi.

Haruhi hummed a song she made up herself while dragging Asahina-san away from the cabin. Asahina-san turned around repeatedly, hoping that I would come along; perhaps I was thinking too much then, but I didn't want to ruin Haruhi's mood, so I let them go.

No matter how insane Haruhi is, just before Asahina-san fell into the sea, she would save her. I prayed and stared at the ceiling, then used my bag as a pillow and lay down. It's going to be an early morning tomorrow, so I'd better get some sleep.

I dreamed about myself doing something strange, but just as I was about to wonder what it was, I was woken up by the commanding airwaves of Haruhi,

"Stop sleeping, you idiot! Get up already! Are you really in the mood for this trip at all? If you're already sleeping on the trip, then what can we expect from you?"

It seems while I was asleep, the ferry had almost arrived at the interchange island. I felt as if I had just suffered an irretrievable loss.

"The first step is the most important! You lack the heart to enjoy things. Look at everyone else. Their expectations for this trip show in the glittering in their eyes!"

I followed the direction of Haruhi's finger towards the three servants preparing to carry their luggage off the ferry.

The smiling youth said,

"Give him a break, Suzumiya-san, he's trying to save up energy for the trip. Who knows, he's probably going to spend all night thinking of how to entertain us next!"

I listened to Koizumi's irrelevant explanation, while observing Nagato's puppet like face and Asahina-san's puppy dog eyes, trying to find the so called glitter within their eyes.

"We're there already?" I muttered.

On a long boat trip, with the SOS Brigade members around…No, let's leave the others aside. I had given in to my desire and taken a long nap. As a result I missed my chance to spend time with Asahina-san inside the elegant looking cabin.

Damn, this is so frustrating. How could I let my summer vacation be over like that? So far, my only memories of this vacation have been playing Go Fish. Shouldn't I have been doing something more interesting on the ferry? Like sharing each other's thoughts on the deck while the sea wind blew softly?

I really felt like kicking my past self in the chest for being so sleepy.

I clutched my half-drowsy head as I condemned myself endlessly.

Click!

A bright light made me go dizzy.

I turned my gaze towards the direction of the sound, only to see Asahina-san holding a camera, with an adorable smile on her angelic face,

“Hee hee! I’ve taken a picture of you waking up.”

She had the face of a pre-school kid who just pulled off a prank.

“I’ve also taken photos of you sleeping. You must have slept soundly.”

Suddenly, I felt revived. Why was Asahina-san secretly taking pictures of me? Could it be that she wanted my photos that badly? Does she intend to place my photo in a cute frame and put it by her pillow, so she can say ‘good night’ to me every night? Yes, that’s not a bad thought at all.

Seriously, if you had wanted my photo, I would have gladly posed for you! Even if I had to give you my photo album which I misplaced somewhere, I wouldn’t have minded at all.

However, as I was making such a suggestion, Asahina-san handed the instant camera to Haruhi.

“Kyon, what are you grinning at? You look like a moron. Best wipe that off your face.”

Haruhi started looking as if she wanted to sell some exclusive pictures to a newspaper. She then stuffed the camera into her bag.

“I’ve had Mikuru-chan be the stand-in photographer for the SOS Brigade. These photos are not for play! What I want is a record of the SOS Brigade’s activities for our descendants to revisit. This silly girl just felt like taking useless pictures, so she has to listen to my directions from now on.”

Then, what informational value is there in taking pictures of me sleeping and waking up?

“Since you have no sense of urgency, I’m going to spread pictures of you sleeping like a moron all over as a cautionary tale! Listen! It’s immoral and against the brigade rules for the subordinates to sleep soundly when the commander isn’t sleeping!”

Haruhi stared at me with a face I wasn’t sure was laughing or scowling. I knew it was useless asking her when she came up with such rules, it’s not going to be written anyway. I might as well play along.

“Alright. What you mean is that if we don’t want to have our faces drawn on, we aren’t allowed to sleep before you, right? In that case, if I sleep after you, does that mean I can draw a mustache on your face?”

“What are you saying? Do you actually intend to do such childish acts? Let me put this straight, I can be very alert. I can retaliate even when asleep. Besides, you’ll be risking the death penalty if you try to do anything foolish to the commander.”

Hey, Haruhi, the number of advanced countries still carrying out capital punishment is actually in the minority. What do you think of that?

“Why should I comment on other countries’ penalty systems? What matters is not some foreign country, but the island we’re going to!”

I prayed that nothing would happen, while pulling my bag over.

The ship shook roughly. Maybe it’s about to dock already. The other passengers were already headed to the exit in groups of two and three.

“A mysterious island, huh……?”

What kind of island awaits us? Just don’t let it be some island that suddenly appeared on the sea, or one that drifted away suddenly.

“Don’t worry.”

Koizumi nodded as though he’d just read my mind,

“There’s nothing special about the island, just that it’s far from land. There’re no monsters or mad scientists, that I can guarantee.”

This guy’s guarantees mean nothing to me. I silently looked at Nagato’s pale face questioningly.

“……”

Nagato also silently replied to me. If there were monsters appearing, she would probably help us beat them off. I’m counting on you, alien.

The ship shook abruptly again.

“Kyaa!”

Without even flinching, Nagato caught Asahina-san, who had lost her balance and nearly fallen over.

There awaiting our arrival were a butler and maid.

"Hi, Arakawa-san, it's been a while."

Koizumi said loudly, raising his arm to greet them.

"You too, Mori-san. Thanks for going to the trouble to pick us up."

Koizumi then turned and looked at us with, our jaws wide open, then shrugged his arms ridiculously like a stage actor trying to impress his audience, his grin four times wider than usual.

"Allow me to introduce them. Arakawa-san and Mori-san are the butler and maid of the new mansion, and will be in charge of taking care of us. Ah yes, you must've already guessed that by their attire."

It was easy to guess. I looked at the two figures who stood still after having bowed to us. I guess in this situation, the right word would be "captivating."

"It must have been a long trip for everyone. I am Arakawa the butler."

The old gentleman with white hair, mustache, and eyebrows, dressed in a tuxedo greeted us and bowed again.

"I'm the maid, Mori Sonou. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The lady standing beside him also bowed at the same angle, and then both raised their heads at the same time. One wonders if they've drilled this countless times.

Arakawa-san looked elderly, but it was difficult to tell his exact age; while Mori-san looked very young. She looked about our age, or was she just putting on make-up to make herself look younger? Or maybe she was born with such a youthful look?

"Butler and maid?"

Haruhi murmured in surprise; my reaction was the same as hers. I never knew these professions existed in Japan. I always thought they only had a conceptual existence, having already been fossilized.

I see. It seems the two people standing gracefully behind Koizumi are genuinely butler and maid. They look so much like it, at least after hearing their self-introductions, one would think, *Ah……I see. They're the real thing*. Especially the maid, Mori-san, if I remember correctly. No matter how you look, she's still a maid. Because she's dressed in proper maid attire. This comes from my many months of experience observing Asahina-san dressed in her maid costume every day in

the club room, so I can guarantee this. And Arakawa-san and Mori-san don't look like they're dressed like that just to entertain Haruhi, but are really dressed for their profession.

"Wah……"

Asahina-san gave a gasp and simply stared at them with awe - more specifically, she was staring at Mori-san. She was half awestruck and 30% troubled. What about the remaining 20%? I believe she was a bit envious. After being forced by Haruhi to wear that costume every day, she must have subconsciously begun to enjoy being a maid.

Nagato didn't give any expression at this moment, and her face remained the same. Yet her black obsidian eyes remained transfixed on those two professionals.

"Now then……"

Arakawa-san invited us with his opera tenor-like voice,

"The boat is prepared to take us to our master's island. The trip shall take about half an hour. As it's a lone island, I do apologize for any inconvenience caused."

Mori-san bowed as well. I felt itchy all over for some reason. I really wanted to tell them that we weren't really that important to deserve having them serve us so elegantly. Could Koizumi be the son of some billionaire? I had thought this guy was just an esper who could only use his powers irregularly. I wonder if he has people calling him "Young Master" every time he comes home?

"I don't really mind!"

Haruhi said in a cheerful voice, blowing off all my questions. As I looked carefully, Haruhi had the smile of someone who has just conned some ignorant sponsor to fund her movie. Hmm……

"That's more like it, a lone island! We wouldn't mind if it took a few hours, let alone half an hour! A lone island in the middle of the ocean is just where I wanted to go. Kyon, Mikuru-chan, you two should be happy. There's a mansion on the island, and a weird butler and maid as well! You probably wouldn't find a second island like this in the whole of Japan!"

There won't be a second island.

"Wah! T…this is great……I…I can't wait!"

Leaving Asahina-san, who was being forced by Haruhi to pretend to be excited, aside, for Haruhi to actually call someone "weird" in front of their faces is just plain rude. Yet those two just smiled. Maybe they *were* weird in some way.

Man, what's weird is this whole trip. And when it comes to weirdness, the SOS Brigade is leagues ahead of everyone, so I'm not qualified to criticize other people. Though I can't just let Haruhi get away with everything like that.

I looked at Koizumi, who was chatting away with Arakawa-san the butler, while Mori-san stood by silently with her hands clasped, staring quietly towards the sea ahead. The sea looked calm, and the skies were clear. Don't think a typhoon will be coming soon.

Will we ever return to the Japanese mainland in one piece?

Nagato's calm poker face just seems so reliable all the time. I felt so useless.

Arakawa-san and Mori-san led us to a small dock not far from the harbor. I had originally imagined seeing a small boat, but there ahead of us was parked a private speedboat, moving gently and idyllically on the waves. The speedboat looked so posh that I dared not ask how much it cost. I suddenly had the urge to go fishing on board that boat.

Thanks to my daydreaming, when I saw Koizumi escorting both Asahina-san, who was astounded by the sight of the speedboat, and Nagato, who just stared blankly at it - but not counting Haruhi, who had leaped on at once on board the boat - I felt a deep sense of regret that my time had passed, never to return. That was supposed to be my job!

We were led into the cabin, and before we could even begin to admire how a boat can have a western style kitchen, the speedboat had begun its departure from the port. It seems that butlers these days all have speedboat licenses, as Arakawa-san was the one driving it.

Mori-san sat opposite me with a gentle smile on her face, as though she were a decoration in the boat. The maid costume looked trendy and dangerous at the same time. I felt that her maid attire was thinner than the costume that Haruhi made Asahina-san wear in the club room every day, but as I'm not too familiar with the maid profession, I wasn't too sure about that.

I wasn't the only one looking uneasy. Asahina-san was the same as well. She had been staring at the maid's costume for some time now, looking very nervous. Does she intend to study how a maid really behaves so she can learn some new tricks to use back in the club room? She's the sort of person who is serious about the most unexpected things.

Nagato sat facing the front, not moving at all. Koizumi had a casual expression, and remained as smiling as ever.

"This is a good boat, perhaps fishing wouldn't be a bad idea?" Who is he suggesting that to anyway?

As for Haruhi……

"Hey, do you know what the mansion is called?"

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

“Is it called something like The House of the Black Death, the Lilas Manor, Koketsu Castle, or the sort?”

“Nothing of the sort.”

“Have there been any frightening stories like the mansion having a lot of hidden traps, or the architect being murdered, or a room where none may leave alive?”

“I haven’t heard of any.”

“Then, are there stories of the owner wearing a mask, or having three weird sisters living within his mind, and then vanishing without a trace?”

“No.” The butler added, “Not yet, anyway.”

“Then, does that mean it’s possible these things might happen some day?”

“Perhaps.”

Is this butler trying to please her?

As the boat sped off, Haruhi had crawled onto the deck and had the above conversation with Arakawa-san. From the contents of the dialogue I could hear over the sounds of the engine and waves, Haruhi seemed to have excessive expectations about the island’s mansion. Speaking of which, why does she want so many strange specifications like an island far away from land? Isn’t it enough to just swim, walk around, get to know each other better, and then return happily? I was hoping for that.

Perhaps it’s too late already.

I never thought there would be a butler and a maid. This is more unexpected than being attacked by a shark in a public swimming pool. So I probably won’t be surprised if the owner of the mansion wears a mask or has other weird looking guests. What other surprises does Koizumi have in store for us?

“Ah! I see it! Is that the villa?”

“It’s the mansion.”

Haruhi’s scream boomed like thunder and pierced through my heart.

The mansion looked quite ordinary from the outside.

The sun slowly tilted towards the west, but it was still some time before dusk. The mansion basked in the light of the setting sun. It seemed to shine with splendor; I'd always believed I'd never set foot in such a place.

The building at the top of the steep hill looked just like something a rich person would build as a summer getaway. There was nothing suspicious about its architecture. It didn't look like any medieval European castle, it didn't have red thorny roses surrounding its outer walls, and there were no strange looking towers attached to it - and of course, no ghosts.

As expected, Haruhi made a face as though realizing she'd just swallowed an onion thinking it was roast beef as she gazed bleakly at that mansion (Haruhi called it a villa).

"This isn't what I imagined. The looks are an important factor, did the architect even refer to previous experience when building this?"

I stood beside Haruhi on the deck, looking at the view of the island. I was forcefully dragged out there by her, by the way.

"Kyon, what do you think? It's a lone island, yet the building looks so ordinary. Don't you think it's a pity?"

I was actually thinking, they didn't need to build a mansion so far away. It'd take more than an hour by private speedboat to get to the nearest convenience store and return. What would you eat if you were to get hungry in the middle of the night? There don't seem to be any vending machines for drinks either.

"I'm talking about the atmosphere! I always thought it'd be one of those eerie villas, but from the looks of it, this is just a vacation mansion! Our objective isn't to come to some rich friend's place to have fun."

I brushed away Haruhi's hair, which was being blown by the wind and was stinging my face.

"That's what they call a field trip. What were you expecting? Going out on an adventure? Or did you want to simulate being stranded on a deserted island?"

"Hmm, that's not a bad idea. I'll include exploring the island as part of the itinerary. Who knows, we may be the first to discover a new species."

Oh no, I've just increased the glitter in Haruhi's eyes. Oh, island, I beg you, please don't come up with anything funny.

As I was praying to the green island……

"The islands around here were apparently formed by ancient volcanic activity."

Koizumi said as he walked out slowly.

“Besides new species, we might even pick up some ancient artifacts. There were artifacts left behind by the ancient Japanese on other islands. It’s quite dramatic, isn’t it?”

I don’t see any connection between the works of the ancients and this new mansion, but I’m not that interested in searching for Tsuchinoko or digging for treasures. Why don’t we split up? Haruhi and Koizumi can go explore the island, while I’ll stay behind with Asahina-san and Nagato and have a stroll by the beach. Now that’s a nice idea.

“Huh? There’s someone over there!”

Haruhi pointed to a newly built pier. It seemed to be built specifically for this speedboat, since there were no other boats parked. A person stood at the edge of the pier waving at us. Seems like it’s a man.

Haruhi instinctively waved back.

“Koizumi, is he the owner of the villa? He looks quite young.”

Koizumi waved and said,

“No, he’s another guest who was invited besides us. I believe he’s the owner’s brother. I’ve only seen him once before.”

“Koizumi,” I interrupted, “You should’ve told us this earlier! I didn’t hear anything before about any other visitors besides us.”

“I only just found out now as well.”

Koizumi shrugged it off calmly.

“There’s no need to worry! He’s a nice person. And of course, the owner Tamaru Keiichi-san is also a nice person.”

This Tamaru Keiichi-san is quite an imaginative person. He built a mansion in such a remote area just so he could live in it during the summer. He’s a distant relative of Koizumi’s, something like his mother’s cousin on her father’s side or something like that. I’m not too sure of the details, but I hear he’s been quite successful in the field of biotechnology, and is now reaping the rewards of his success. His wealth must be so enormous that he doesn’t know how to spend it all, otherwise he wouldn’t have built such a mansion.

The speedboat gradually slowed down as it approached the pier, until we could see the person’s face. He was dressed in youthful attire, probably in his twenties. He’s probably Tamaru Keiichi’s brother.

The butler is Arakawa-san, the maid is Mori Sonou-san.

That leaves the owner of the mansion, Tamaru Keiichi-san.

Is that the entire cast for this trip?

We spent a few hours being rocked on the boat, so thanks to that, by the time we got onto land, we still felt as though the ground was moving.

The young man had a pleasant smile, and ran towards the speedboat to greet us.

"Ah, Itsuki, it's been a while."

"You too, Yutaka-san. Thanks for coming over."

Koizumi replied, then he began to introduce us one by one.

"These are the friends that have been taking good care of me in school."

I don't remember ever taking good care of you, but Koizumi pointed at us, lined up in a row.

"The cheery girl here is Suzumiya Haruhi-san. She's an incredible friend. She's pretty easy going and very energetic. I ought to learn some of her assertiveness."

What kind of introduction is this? A cold sweat dropped from my back. And Haruhi, you too. Why are you wearing that fake courteous looking mask? Have your brain cells been damaged from being rocked too much on the boat?

"I'm Suzumiya. Koizumi here is an irreplaceable member of my brig……I mean association. He was the one who invited us to this island. He's a very reliable vice-command……I mean deputy-chairman. Hee hee."

Koizumi ignored the cold steam being emitted by me and went on to introduce the other members, such as:

"This is Asahina Mikuru-san. As you may see, she's the cute and beautiful idol of our school. Her smile is enough to bring peace to our world."

Or:

"This is Nagato Yuki-san. Her grades are so good she's seen as an encyclopedia never seen before in this world. She doesn't talk much, but that's her charm."

He went on and on with his exaggerated introductions of all the members, as though he'd read them from some blind date agency client file. Of course I was included in his cheesy introduction, but I'd prefer to gloss over it here.

With a smile befitting of Koizumi's relative, Yutaka-san said,

"Welcome everyone, I'm Tamaru Yutaka, right now I'm just an employee helping out at my brother's company. Itsuki always talks to me a lot about you. I was very worried for him when he suddenly had to transfer schools. It's great that he's made so many great friends."

"Well, then."

Arakawa-san's cheerful voice boomed from behind.

Turning around, I saw the butler and Mori Sonou-san carrying our luggage and getting off the boat.

"The sun's a bit bright here. May I suggest we move to the mansion?"

Yutaka-san nodded and said,

"You're right, brother's waiting for everyone. Let's bring the luggage in as well, I'll help."

"We're fine. Could you go help Arakawa-san and Mori-san instead? They bought a lot of groceries from the main island."

Koizumi smiled and said. Yutaka-san also replied with a smile.

"I'll be looking forward to the meal!"

After the niceties, we followed Koizumi's lead and headed for the mansion at the top of the cliff.

Thinking back, things were already beginning to get strange then.

Of course, this is all spoken in hindsight.

At the end of the staircase, as steep as Mt. Fuji, lies the mansion. This probably sounded bad to Haruhi, for the mansion ahead looked absolutely normal, not the sort of villa or Japanese-style inn she had expected.

The three-story building gave the impression of flatness. Perhaps because it looked a bit wide? I even wanted to count how many rooms there were. I guess this mansion could hold up to two football teams with room to spare. The mansion seems to have been built after leveling out the dense woods on the hill, but how did they ship all those building materials? A lot of logistics were probably needed. I'm really perplexed at how the rich operate.

"This way please."

Koizumi led us to outside the entrance hall like a butler. We stood in a row. The moment had come for us to meet the owner face to face.

Save Haruhi, who stepped forward like a horse not following its herd, rearing its head out suddenly. I understood how eager she was for this moment, she even stuck her tongue out on her lips and placed it back in many times. Asahina-san cutely combed her hair, trying to give a good first impression. While Nagato stood still, as usual, like one of those lucky cats by store entrances.

Koizumi turned and looked at us, a small smile growing on his face, as he very casually pushed the button on the intercom near the door.

Someone replied, and Koizumi went through a lot of niceties again.

Ten seconds later, the door opened slowly.

Needless to say, the person welcoming us wasn't wearing an iron mask, nor some funny hat with shades, neither did he suddenly attack us, or say some very puzzling remarks. Just a normal middle-aged man.

"Welcome!"

I don't know if Tamaru Keiichi-san became wealthy suddenly or gradually, but right now this middle-aged man was dressed in just a golf shirt and working trousers, stretching out one of his hands, beckoning us to come in.

"Itsuki, and everyone else, I've been waiting for you for a long time now. Frankly, this place is really boring, you'll get frustrated after staying for three days. The only other person to accept my invitation besides Itsuki was Yutaka. Oh my!"

Keiichi-san's vision moved to my face, then towards Asahina-san, Haruhi and Nagato.

"Itsuki, you have such cute friends! I heard from Itsuki, but you are prettier than I thought. You've certainly injected some life into this lonely little island. You're most welcome."

Haruhi smiled heartily, Asahina-san bowed her head politely, while Nagato remained motionless. Three people with three different reactions, yet they all had the eyes of someone seeing a music teacher appear during history class, looking at Keiichi-san, who was welcoming us from the bottom of his heart. After a while, Haruhi stepped forward and said,

"We're very grateful you could invite us here. It's an honor to be able to stay in such a luxurious mansion. On behalf on everyone, I'd like to express my gratitude."

She spoke in a higher pitch than usual, as though reciting a speech. Does she intend to put on that appearance for the whole trip? I suggest before she sheds her sheepskin and reveals her wolf fangs, she ought to take off that invisible mask on her face.

Perhaps Tamaru Keiichi-san was thinking something like that as well?

“So you’re Suzumiya-san? Hmm, you’re different from what I heard. Itsuki told me you’re a more……um……how should I say this, Itsuki?”

The ball got bounced into Koizumi’s court. Without flinching, he said with ease,

“A frank person? I do remember saying that.”

“That’s it! He said you were quite a frank girl.”

“Ah, really?”

Haruhi promptly took off her mask, and put on a smile that she rarely showed outside the club room.

“Nice to meet you, mansion owner! Allow me to ask frankly, have any strange events happened in this mansion before? Or maybe some frightening rumors from the locals about this island being haunted? These sort of things interest me the most.”

Don’t go around declaring your interests to someone you just met for the first time. To be precise, don’t say stupid stuff about what happened in the past to the owner. What would we do if we were driven away?

However, Tamaru Keiichi-san was simply such a nice person that he only smiled and said,

“I’ve got similar interests to yours, though I’ve not heard of anything bad lately. Besides, this island used to be uninhabited.”

He kindly pointed his hand towards the back,

“Well, don’t just stand there, come in! This is a western style mansion, so you don’t need to take off your shoes. I think I’ll show you to your rooms. I wanted Arakawa-san to show you around, but it seems he’s attending to the luggage, so I guess I’ll be your guide for now.”

Keiichi said and led us into the mansion.

I wish I could provide everyone with a blueprint of the mansion to show where the rooms are located, but I’ve known I had no talent for drawing ever since I was in first grade, so I won’t bother. To put it simply, our quarters are all on the second floor, Tamaru Keiichi-san’s bedroom and the guest room for Yutaka-san are on the third. Maybe this represents their family ties. The butler Arakawa-san and the maid Mori-san each have a room on the first floor……

That’s about how it is.

“Does this mansion have a name?”

Haruhi asked; Keiichi-san smiled wryly and answered,

“Right now we haven’t come up with one, but if you have any suggestions for the name, I’m all ears.”

“Well then, why not call it the House of Fear or the House of Horrors? What do you think? And we could name every room as well, like the Bloodsucking Room, or the Cursed Room?”

“Hmm, that’s a great idea! I’ll come up with some room names the next time I invite someone.”

I have no intentions of sleeping in a room with a name that gives me nightmares.

We crossed the hall and climbed the high-class wooden stairway up to the second floor. The interior was designed like an inn, with a row of doors lined up next to each other.

“The rooms are all about the same size, they’re divided into single and double bedrooms. Pick any you like.”

What should I do? I wouldn’t mind sharing with anybody, but there’s five of us. If we had to share, there’d be an odd one out, and no matter how hard I tried, I could only think of Nagato being the one left out. If I loudly announced my roommate priority, I’m sure Nagato wouldn’t mind, but I’d probably be killed by Haruhi’s instant backfist.

“Hmm, I think one person per room isn’t too bad.”

Koizumi concluded.

“Since we’re only in our rooms while sleeping anyway. We can just walk between the rooms as we please. I’d like to ask, can the doors be locked?”

“They sure can.”

Tamaru Keiichi-san smiled and nodded.

“The keys are placed on the cabinet by the bed. The doors won’t lock automatically, so you don’t have to worry about being locked outside your rooms by accident. But take good care of the keys and don’t lose them.”

I won’t be needing a key. Even before sleeping, I might just leave the door ajar. Maybe Asahina-san will come sneaking in for some reason after everyone’s fallen asleep. Besides, I didn’t bring any valuables worth stealing, I don’t think anyone would dare steal when the suspect list is so narrow. Even if there was, the goddamn thief would definitely be Haruhi.

“Then I’ll go see how Arakawa-san is doing. You can take your time walking around. Please don’t forget where the emergency exits are located. I’ll see you later.”

Keiichi-san then went down the stairs.

This is how Haruhi described her impression of Keiichi san,

“It’s because there’s nothing strange that makes him even more suspicious.”

“Then if he did look suspicious, how would you explain that?”

“Just from how he looked, he’d have to be a strange person!”

According to this girl’s subjective logic, there is nothing in this world that is not strange. Her standards would shock even the ISO. Maybe you could work for JARO. I bet you could work hard feeling fulfilled every day there.

After leaving our luggage in our rooms, we met in the double bedroom Haruhi had chosen as her room. It’s so like Haruhi to occupy a double bedroom all by herself. The words courteous and modest do not exist in her vocabulary.

The three girls sat on the bed, I sat at the make-up table, while Koizumi leaned against the wall and crossed his arms looking relaxed.

“I know!”

Haruhi shouted suddenly, and as usual, I instinctively asked,

“Know what?”

“The suspect.”

Haruhi said promptly. Her face now had the aura of a Great Detective, for some reason.

I hesitantly spoke for the other three,

“What suspect? There isn’t even a case yet, we only just arrived!”

“From my instincts, the suspect is the owner of this place. I think his first target will be Mikuru-chan.”

“Eh!?”

Asahina-san seemed to be really scared. She trembled like a rabbit at the sound of an eagle's wings flapping, clutching onto Nagato's skirt. Nagato said nothing.

"……"

Only fixing her gaze towards some spot in mid-air.

"I'm asking you, what suspect?" I asked again, "Or more like, what kind of criminal are you trying to mold Tamaru Keiichi-san into?"

"How should I know? From his eyes, he seems to have something planned. My instincts are usually correct. By then, we'll be involved in some shocking event."

It would be fine if it was just a normal surprise party, but Haruhi was expecting something way beyond that, not some messy party where she would only play a bit role.

Think about it. The image of Keiichi-san removing his nice guy appearance, his eyes flashing with insanity, and carrying a sharp butcher knife trying to cut all the guests' stomachs open. Just because he accidentally stumbled upon some ancient grave deep within the island forest, and got possessed by a murderous ghost.

"Can something that dumb really happen?"

I waved my hand horizontally in mid air, making a "don't get yourself into trouble" gesture.

No matter how hard you think about it, it's impossible that someone Koizumi knows would turn into something like that. That "Organization" group is not completely stupid, they probably did a lot of background checks beforehand. Koizumi had his usual harmless smile, and Arakawa-san the butler, Mori-san the maid, as well as Tamaru Yutaka-san all looked very far from the image of a scary person. By the way, Haruhi is hoping for a mystery, not some interference from the magnetic field, right?

If things were to happen, it would just be one to two murders at most, right? Besides, I don't think such things would happen just because she wished it so. The weather's great outside, and the sea's calm. This island is no closed circle.

Moreover, no matter how insane Haruhi is, she wouldn't actually wish for someone to die. If Haruhi were like that, I would have been killed by her impatience already, considering I've tagged along with her all this time.

Haruhi didn't seem to sense my worries, and said innocently,

"Let's go swimming first! What else is there to do besides swimming when we're by the sea? Everyone, swim to your heart's content! We'll have a race and see who gets swept away by the waves first!"

That's not a bad idea, provided the coast guard is available and on standby.

But we've only just arrived, do we have to go so soon? Don't you even want to take a break after all the exhaustion from that long boat trip? Speaking of which, even if Haruhi has never felt tired before, she should still be considerate of other people instead of trying to do things by her own standards!

"What on earth are you mumbling about? The sun won't stop rising and setting even if you offered sacrifices to Apollo's temple! It would be a waste of time if we don't go before the sun sets."

Haruhi stretched both her arms and wrapped them round Asahina-san and Nagato's necks.

"KYAA~!" Asahina-san closed her eyes and screamed. "……" While Nagato didn't even have a reaction.

"Swimsuits! Swimsuits! Everyone get dressed in your swimsuits and meet in the hall! Hee hee, I've helped choose these two cuties' swimsuits! You must be looking forward to them, right Kyon?"

Haruhi revealed an expression of "I know what you've been thinking already" and smiled evilly, revealing her white teeth.

"You're damn right."

I was reinvigorated and stood upright. This was indeed part of my reason for coming here. I will not allow any objections.

"Koizumi, is the private beach here completely booked for us?"

"Yes it is. People usually go to the beach to collect shells anyway. Few people ever come here anyway, but the waves can be strong here, so try not to swim too far. If you were serious about wanting to have a race……"

"Don't be ridiculous. I was only joking! Mikuru-chan's bound to get swept away by a black tide to get fed to the fish. Everyone listen up, don't get too carried away and swim too far! Remain in my field of vision."

Is it appropriate for Haruhi to be in charge of everyone's safety? I guess I'll have to help. At least I need to be careful not to let Asahina-san out of my sight for more than two seconds.

"Hey, Kyon!"

Haruhi's finger pointed towards the tip of my nose.

“I don’t like that stupid smile on your face, so cut it out! You’re better off frowning. And I’m not handing you the camera either!”

Remaining passionate from beginning to end, the Haruhi Orient Express sped on, ignoring any obstacles, smiling and giving out orders,

“Then, let’s go!”

So, as such, we came to the beach.

The sun was already setting, but the rays and heat were pretty much up to summer standards. The waves washed upon the sand, the clouds floated above in the sky like marshmallows. Our hair was blown by the sea breeze, carrying the scent of the waves.

While it’s called a private beach, there really wasn’t any need to set up any special booking, as no one ever comes to this uninhabited island anyway. I guess the only people who would come here to enjoy a beach spa are probably some foreign tourists conned by those rubbish travel magazines. Besides the five of us, there was no doubt that the beach was pretty much empty. There weren’t even any seabirds.

So, besides me and Koizumi, the only other living beings able to enjoy the sight of Haruhi and the girls in their swimsuits were the barnacles attached on the shore rocks.

I laid the straw mat under the umbrella, and squinted my eyes, enjoying Asahina-san’s every move, looking shyly, while Haruhi came from behind and grabbed her.

“Mikuru-chan, the best way to enjoy the seaside is to swim! C’mon, let’s go! It’s bad for your health not to enjoy the sunshine!”

“Ah, I’m not really fond of standing in the sunshine.”

Haruhi ignored the cowering protests of Asahina-san, and pushed the small and pale skinned senpai into the water.

“Wah! Salty!”

Asahina-san was actually surprised at something so trivially obvious, flapping her arms on the water surface.

At this moment, Nagato……

“……”

……sat on her beach chair in her swimsuit and quietly read her thick novel.

“Different people sure have different ways to have fun.”

Koizumi, who was playing beach ball, opened his mouth to show me his smile.

“One should spend their free time doing what they like most, otherwise it wouldn’t be called free time. Don’t you intend to enjoy this carefree trip for the next four days and three nights?”

Isn’t Haruhi the only one doing as she pleases? I never once thought Asahina-san, being forced to play along by Haruhi, would understand the true meaning of being relaxed.

“Hey, Kyon! Koizumi-kun! You guys come over as well!”

Haruhi yelled at us like a siren warning. I warily got up. To be honest, I didn’t mind that much. Not counting Haruhi, just being able to stand next to Asahina-san is exactly what I’ve wished for. Taking the blown beach ball from Koizumi’s hand, I began walking on the sizzling beach.

Once we sensed our muscles starting to fatigue, we returned to the mansion, took a bath and had a rest in our rooms. The sky is now littered with stars. Mori-san then led us to the dining room.

During dinner time:

The dinner for that night was quite flamboyant. I don’t think they were meaning to grant Asahina-san’s wish, but there was pickled fish on every one of our plates. Being used to poverty, I had to sit upright in respect after seeing all this. I get to eat all of this for free? Is that really okay?

“Be my guests.”

Keiichi-san smiled and showed his generosity.

“Think of it as a reward for having come this far, because it’s just too boring for me alone here. Actually I’m quite picky in choosing my guests, but of course since you’re Itsuki’s friends, you’re most welcome.”

For some reason, Keiichi-san was now dressed very formally compared to when we last saw him. He wore a black tuxedo with a bowtie on his neck. The dishes were a mix of Japanese and western cuisine. There was lamb, French roast fish, and some steamed stuff, all sorts of things. The only one using a fork and knife was Keiichi-san, since we had asked for chopsticks at the beginning.

“This is great! Who made these?”

Haruhi asked while revealing her amazing appetite worthy of nomination for a speed eating contest.

“The butler Arakawa is also the chef here, his cooking’s not bad, huh?”

“I must thank him, please call him out later.”

Haruhi said as though she were a gourmand who had just tasted a high class dinner.

I looked at Asahina-san, who widened her eyes further every time she took a bite; then at Nagato, who doesn’t seem to eat much, yet she never stopped picking up food with her chopsticks; and at Koizumi, who chatted happily with Yutaka-san.

“Would you like something to drink?”

Mori-san asked, dressed in her maid costume and playing the role of waitress the whole time. She carried a small, long wine bottle and smiled. Probably wine, I guess. While it’s questionable to offer alcohol to minors, I still decided to ask for one glass. I’ve never tasted wine before, but one ought to be more daring. And after seeing Mori-san’s charming smile, I found it hard to refuse.

“Ah, what’s Kyon drinking? I want one too.”

Due to Haruhi’s request, glasses filled with wine had now been passed into everyone’s hands.

I felt this was the beginning of the nightmare.

That day, I discovered Asahina-san is completely wine intolerant, while Nagato is a formidable bottomless pit; as for Haruhi, she’s just a hopeless drunkard.

Due to the circumstances, I drank quite a lot and so my memory was quite blurred, but I do remember Haruhi grabbing onto the wine bottle and drinking nonstop while knocking on Keiichi-san’s head.

“Ah……You’re so great! To thank you for inviting us, I’ll offer you Mikuru-chan! Train her well so she can become a better maid! Because this girl is completely hopeless!”

I remotely remember her yelling with a heightened pitch.

The real maid Mori-san placed the wine bottle back on the table like a bowling pin, and quietly sliced the apples and pears from the fruits basket, handing them out as dessert. While the only make-believe maid in the club room, Asahina-san was already lying on the table with her face all red.

Nagato finished the glass of wine Mori-san poured for her. I don't know how the alcohol in her body gets dissipated. Her face remained the same while she emptied glass after glass like a whale drinking seawater.

Yutaka-san asked curiously,

"Is she really okay?"

He looked really worried, I still remembered that scene.

That night, it seems that Koizumi carried an unconscious me back to my room. That's what Koizumi told me afterwards. He said I reeked of booze just as much as Haruhi, but since I don't remember anything, I pretended not to hear that, and refused to remember that such a thing happened. I'll treat it as one of Koizumi's jokes.

Because something happened on the second day that pushed our hangovers to the back of our minds.

A storm brewed suddenly on the morning of the second day.

The rain water splattered diagonally on the window surface, the strong wind had an ominous sound. The forest around the mansion rustled as though demons were living in it.

"Such bad luck, of all the times to have a typhoon."

Haruhi said dejectedly while looking outside the window. We were gathered in Haruhi's room, discussing how we should spend the day today.

This was after we had our breakfast. Keiichi-san was absent from the table. Arakawa-san said Keiichi-san always felt terrible in the morning after waking up, so for him to wake up before noon was very rare.

Haruhi turned towards us,

"This has now really become a lone island. This is the situation of a lifetime, maybe something will happen!"

Asahina-san gasped and moved her eyes around, while Koizumi and Nagato's facial expressions remained business-like as usual.

The waves were still and calm yesterday. Now they've reached tsunami alert status, impossible for any ship to sail in. If this goes on until the day after tomorrow, we'll really be stranded on a lone island against our wishes, just as Haruhi had wished for. A closed circle, right?

Koizumi gave a smile, trying to calm everyone down,

"This typhoon seems to be moving quite fast, I think it'll get better the day after tomorrow. As they say, things come and go quickly."

According to the weather report, this would be correct. But there were no reports of a typhoon coming in yesterday's report! Just whose mind conjured this storm!?

"It's coincidental."

Koizumi said with ease.

"This is a normal natural phenomenon, it comes with the summer weather package, I guess? There's always one big typhoon every year."

"We were supposed to explore around the island, but it seems we have to cancel that." Haruhi said bitterly, "Ah well, let's find some games that we can play indoors!"

Haruhi seemed to have completely forgotten the original purpose of this field trip, as the emphasis now moved into having fun. Now this was something worth cheering for, because I didn't want to walk to the other end of the island to find some unidentified creature's carcass being washed ashore and stuck between the boulders.

Koizumi made his suggestion,

"I seem to remember there's a game room here, I'll go ask Keiichi-san to open it for us. Which do you like? Mah-jong or pool? If we asked, we could even get a snooker table set up."

Haruhi agreed,

"Then let's have a table tennis match! We'll decide the winner of the first SOS Brigade Table Tennis Tournament in a round-robin format! Sorry for those who want to play pool, I'll treat them to drinks on the boat trip back. Don't hold back now!"

The game room was located in the basement. In the wide hall was placed a Mah-jong table and a pool table. They even had a roulette and Baccarat table. Do Koizumi's relatives secretly run a casino here?

"What do you think?" Koizumi replied with a foolish smile, pulling out the folded snooker table from the side.

By the way, after an intense battle with me, Haruhi won the table tennis tournament. She then held the Mah-jong contest, but besides Koizumi, no one in the SOS Brigade knew how to play Mah-jong, so we had to learn as we played along. During the game, the Tamaru brothers also joined in, making it a lively Mah-jong contest. Haruhi distorted the rules and created *yaku* to suit herself, racking up win after win with puzzling combinations like "*Nishoku Zetsu Ichimon,*" "Chantamodoki," "Iishanten Paralysis" and so on. Well, it made me laugh, so I let it pass. And we weren't playing for money, anyway.

"Ron! That's about ten thousand points!"

"Suzumiya-san, that's yakuman."

I secretly sighed, perhaps it was better to look on the bright side and enjoy the fun the trip brought. As things stand, it seems unlikely a huge sea creature will appear, or natives coming out from the forest. After all, this is a lone island far way from the mainland. There won't be strange things coming in from outside so easily.

I decided to think like that and relax myself. Tamaru Keiichi-san and Yutaka-san, Arakawa-san, Mori-san are all acquainted with Koizumi, they all look normal. We're still short of characters necessary to trigger a strange event.

I hope everything goes well. I prayed in my heart.

Yet the gods just never seem to answer my prayers.

It happened on the morning of the third day.

We spent the whole second day playing and eating, and as the weather worsened by nightfall, the same dining hall scene repeated itself again. On the third day, I struggled to wake up with a splitting headache from the hangover, if Koizumi hadn't carried us back to our rooms, I guess I would still be sleeping in the dining hall with Haruhi and Asahina-san.

I opened the curtains on the morning of the third day. The storm continued.

"I wonder if we can return tomorrow?"

I washed off the dizzyness from my face with some cold water, trying hard to walk in a straight line. I walked down the stairs with caution, not wanting to trip and tumble over.

There gathered in the dining hall were Haruhi and Asahina-san with the same miserable face as mine, and Koizumi and Nagato with their usual expressions.

The Tamaru brothers haven't come down yet, maybe they've reached their limits after drinking for two consecutive nights? I remembered Haruhi pouring wine over their glasses. Haruhi was already reckless when sober, with alcohol she became worse, and just thinking of her antics last night simply worsened my headache. I decided never to force myself to drink endlessly.

"I don't want to drink wine anymore."

Haruhi frowned and said as if she had learnt her lesson.

"I don't know why, but all my memories after dinner seem to have disappeared. Isn't that a pity? I felt as if we had wasted a lot of time. Argh, I don't want to get drunk again. Tonight is 'alcohol free night'."

Normally, high school students are not supposed to get drunk. Perhaps I ought to compliment Haruhi for actually saying something responsible for once? Yet, Asahina-san's dreamy expression when she was drunk looked just so seductive, I must admit I wouldn't mind drinking so much.

"Then it's decided!"

Koizumi nodded and agreed right away, he then said to Mori-san who just came in pushing a cart with our breakfast on it,

"We won't be needing any wine for tonight. Please just prepare some juice instead."

"Understood."

Mori-san bowed politely and started handing out the bacon and eggs plates on to the table.

Yutaka-san had still not appeared after we had finished our breakfast. As Keiichi-san normally feels ill during morning, his absence was expected, but not Yutaka-san's. At this moment……

"Excuse me."

Arakawa-san and Mori-san appeared before us. I noticed a troubled expression within his usually calm butler face. I have a bad feeling about this.

"What happened?" Koizumi asked, "Is there a problem?"

"Yes." Arakawa-san said, "I believe it is sort of a problem. I had asked Mori-san to go check Yutaka-sama's room."

Mori-san nodded her head, Arakawa-san continued,

“As the door wasn’t locked, I opened it to find that Yutaka-sama’s not inside.”

With a voice as clear as a bell, Mori-san said glancing at the table cloth,

“The room was empty, and the bed doesn’t seem to be slept on at all.”

“I tried to contact the master’s room using an internal phone line, but there was no response.”

Haruhi released the glass of orange juice she was holding after hearing Arakawa-san said that.

“What does that mean? Yutaka-san is missing while Keiichi-san doesn’t answer the phone?”

“To put it bluntly, that’s how it is.” Arakawa-san replied.

“Couldn’t you enter Keiichi-san’s room? Do you have a backup key?”

“I have the backup keys to all the rooms save the master’s bedroom. As his room has a lot of work-related documents, only he has access to the backup keys, just to be safe.”

The bad feeling has begun to hover as a dark cloud, shrouding two-thirds of my heart. The mansion owner who hasn’t woken up, and his brother who was missing.

Arakawa-san bowed slightly.

“I would like to visit the master’s bedroom in a moment. If you do not mind, would you please accompany me? I hope I’m wrong, but I have a bad feeling about this.”

Haruhi quickly gestured something to me with her eyes. What’s she trying to say?

“Maybe we should come along.”

Koizumi stood up without hesitation.

“Maybe he’s so ill he couldn’t get up. We may have to break the door down.”

Haruhi swiftly jumped up from her chair,

“Kyon, let’s go! I’m getting all uneasy. Yuki and Mikuru-chan, you two come along as well!”

In this moment, Haruhi revealed a hitherto unseen serious expression on her face.

Allow me to briefly go through what happened afterwards.

Keiichi-san's room was located on the third floor, there was no response no matter how many times we knocked. Koizumi tried turning the doorknob, but the door still won't open. The wooden door now stood like a wall, blocking our access.

Before going there, we also went to Tamaru Yutaka-san's room. As Mori-san had described, the bedsheets were tidy, as though no one has slept on it. Just where did he go? Could both brothers be hiding in Keiichi-san's room?

"The room is locked from the inside, that means there's someone inside."

Koizumi held his chin and gave a look of thinking deeply. He said in an unprecedented intense tone,

"Looks like we no longer have a choice. We'll have to break down the door. Things are getting serious that lives may be at stake here."

So we lined up together and rammed ourselves towards the door like a bunch of rugby players. The line-up included me, Koizumi and Arakawa-san. I trust Nagato would be able to push the door down easily with just her finger, but she decided her magic wouldn't be appropriate here with everyone looking. Under the watchful eyes of the three SOS Brigade girls and Mori-san, the three of us bravely rammed the door many times, just as the bones in my shoulders were beginning to yell out in pain……

The door finally burst open like a spring.

Losing our balance, I, Koizumi and Arakawa-san all fell in towards the room with our momentum. And then……

Yes, we have now returned to the scene at the beginning. It took a long time to catch up. Now, back to the present.

……

……

…

After a lengthy flashback, I slowly moved my eyes away from Keiichi-san, whose chest has been stabbed with a knife, towards the door which has been burst open. This is a newly built mansion, even the doors looked shiny……I shouldn't be thinking of totally irrelevant stuff now.

Arakawa-san bent his body and knelt down by his master's side, touching his neck with the tip of his finger, then slowly lifted his head to face us.

“He has passed away.”

Perhaps it’s due to his profession, he sounded very sullen.

“Ah…ah……”

Asahina-san knelt on the ground looking worn out, this is understandable, because right now I felt like doing that as well. I even found Nagato’s wooden expression to be a salvation.

“Things have become serious.”

Koizumi went towards Keiichi-san and knelt by him opposite Arakawa-san, carefully handling Keiichi-san’s suit and examining his shirt.

The white shirt has now been dyed with some dark-reddish liquid, forming an irregular pattern.

“Huh?”

He made an exclamation. I looked at his hand and saw a notebook placed inside the chest pocket of Keiichi-san’s shirt. The blade seemed to pierce through the notebook and into the heart. The suspect must have possessed some formidable strength in order to do that. I don’t think it would be the girls here, though for Haruhi, it just might be possible with her incredible power.

Koizumi’s voice carried a tint of sadness,

“Right now our priority is to preserve the crime scene. Let us leave this place.”

“Mikuru-chan, are you alright?”

It’s not surprising for Haruhi to be so worried, since Asahina-san was close to fainting. She knelt wearily on the floor besides Nagato’s thin legs and closing her eyes tightly.

“Yuki, let’s carry Mikuru-chan to my room! You grab her other arm.”

Haruhi actually said something with common sense, maybe this means she is disturbed inside. With her arms grabbed by Nagato and Haruhi, Asahina-san was slowly dragged and carried away off the corridor.

After making sure they had left, I observed the surroundings.

Arakawa-san put his hands together and paid his respects to his master now lying on the floor, while Mori-san lowered her head with a sad face. Up till now Yutaka-san still remained missing while the storm outside continued.

“Now…” Koizumi said to me, “It seems we need to think about what has transpired.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. Koizumi’s normal smile suddenly returned to his mouth.

“Haven’t you realized? This is now a genuine closed circle.”

I already knew that long before.

“This looks like a murder.”

Well it doesn’t look like suicide.

“Besides, this room is totally sealed off.”

I turned and noticed all the windows were locked from the inside.

“How does the suspect commit his act and leave safely in a room that can’t be accessed at all?”

Why don’t you ask the suspect himself!?

“You’re right,” Koizumi agreed with me, “We’d better ask Yutaka-san about this.”

Koizumi asked Arakawa-san to call the police, then turned and said to me,

“Please wait at Suzumiya-san’s room first, I’ll be coming over as well later.”

That seemed like a good idea, since there wasn’t much I could do.

I knocked on the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

The door opened slightly, Haruhi peeked from inside. She then let me in with a perplexed look on her face.

“Where’s Koizumi-kun?”

“He’ll be here soon.”

Asahina-san was left to sleep on one of the double beds. Her sleeping face was enough to compel any passing-by prince to come and kiss her. But from her pained expression, she should be in a state of coma; it’s such a pity.

Beside her sat Nagato as though watching over a coffin. Keep up the good work! Don't ever leave Asahina-san's side.

"Hey, what do you think?"

Haruhi seemed to be asking me.

"Think of what?"

"I mean Keiichi-san's death. This is a murder incident, right?"

Objectively speaking, the answer's pretty obvious, isn't it? I tried to deduce. We burst open the locked door to find the owner of the mansion lying on the floor, with a knife stabbed on his chest. A murder happening inside a sealed room in an island trapped in the middle of a storm. This is just too elaborate.

"It seems like that's the case."

Time stopped for a few seconds, Haruhi then sighed deeply and sort of replied,

"Hmm……"

Haruhi placed her hand on her temple and sat on her bed.

"How can this be? I never expected things to develop this way."

She quietly murmured. I should be asking you that. Weren't you the one who was anticipating that something would happen?

"But, I never thought it would come true!"

Haruhi scowled, then changed her expression. She seemed to be troubled by what expression she should put on. I was kind of relieved that she didn't seem happy about this, because I have no intention of playing the role of the second victim.

I looked at Asahina-san, who was sleeping with an angel face.

"She should be fine, I guess. She just fainted. Such a direct reaction, I'm envious of her. This is so like how Mikuru-chan would react. It's better than going hysterical."

Haruhi said thoughtlessly.

A sealed room murder incident on a lone island within a storm. What are the chances of that occurring in a trip? Then again, we *are* the SOS Brigade, not some Occult Study Group, or Mystery Novels Association. Searching for mysterious events is exactly the reason Haruhi founded the SOS Brigade, so in truth, encountering this kind of incident perhaps embodies the

founding principles of the SOS Brigade. Of course, it's a whole different story when we're actually experiencing it.

Has this happened since Haruhi had been expecting it?

"Man, this is so frustrating……"

Haruhi leaped off her bed and paced around the room.

For me, she looked like a kid who wanted to pull a small prank on April Fool's Day, but found out the prank went too far and was feeling troubled. She seemed to be taken completely by surprise, and this troubled me as well.

What should we do?

If possible, I'd like to lie down and sleep beside Asahina-san, but it's useless trying to escape reality now. There's got to be a way to deal with this. What does Koizumi intend to do?

"Hmm, after all, we can't just stay here doing nothing."

After all? Haruhi said that matter-of-factly and stood before my face. She looked at me seriously with her challenging eyes.

"I need to confirm something. Kyon, come with me."

I really don't want to just leave Asahina-san alone here.

"Yuki's here as well, so don't worry! Yuki, have the door locked, and don't let anybody in, you understand?"

Nagato carried her calm demeanor and looked at me and Haruhi.

"Understood."

She replied without even changing the tone of her voice.

Instantaneously, the pair of light filtering eyes made contact with my eyes. At this moment, Nagato nodded slightly in a way only I could notice, that's what I think anyway.

I don't think anything dangerous would happen to me and Haruhi, right? If something funny were to happen, it's unlikely for Nagato not to intervene. I convinced myself, remembering what happened at the studio apartment of the Computer Study Group's president.

"Let's go, Kyon."

Haruhi grabbed my wrist and stepped out towards the corridor.

“Just where’re we going?”

“To Keiichi-san’s room, of course! I didn’t observe it closely just now, so I need to check again.”

At the image of Keiichi-san lying on the floor with a knife stabbed on his chest, and the blood soaked on his white shirt, I hesitated. That was not a view worth appreciating.

Haruhi walked and said,

“Then, we need to find out where Yutaka-san is. He may be still in the building, besides……”

For something this serious, if Yutaka-san had nothing to do with this, then it doesn’t make sense for him to disappear. There could only be two possibilities for his absence.

I was dragged by Haruhi, who climbed the stairs and said,

“Either Yutaka-san is the killer and has escaped the scene; or Yutaka-san is also a victim……right?”

“Yeah, but if Yutaka-san isn’t the killer, then it’ll become troublesome.”

“No matter who did it, it’s all annoying for me……”

Haruhi looked at me diagonally,

“Kyon, in this mansion, besides the Tamaru brothers, there’s only Arakawa-san and Mori-san left, and the five of us. Could the suspect be one of them? I don’t want to suspect my own brigade, and I don’t want to hand them over to the police.”

She sounded very calm saying that.

I see, so you were worried about one of us being a murderer, huh? I never contemplated such a possibility. Asahina-san was out of the question, while Nagato would have done it in a more efficient manner; as for Koizumi……that’s right, Koizumi was the one closest to Tamaru-san. He said Tamaru-san was his distant relative, compared to total strangers like us, he certainly seemed much closer than us……

“No.”

I knocked my head softly.

Koizumi’s no idiot. He wouldn’t deliberately do such a thing under these circumstances. I do not believe that he would kill someone just to satisfy the conditions for a closed circle. He’s not that stupid.

We don’t need anyone else to have such a thinking pattern. We already have Haruhi.

Outside of Keiichi-san's room on the third floor stood Arakawa-san with his legs apart.

"I've called the police, and they've instructed me not to let anyone in."

He lowered his head. The door remained as it was when we burst it open, I could barely see Keiichi-san's finger just behind Arakawa-san's shoulder.

"When are the police coming?"

Haruhi asked questioningly, Arakawa-san replied politely,

"Once this storm subsides. According to the weather report, the weather would improve by tomorrow afternoon, so I guess they'll arrive by then."

"Hmm."

Haruhi occasionally glanced into the room.

"I have something to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Did Keiichi-san and Yutaka-san get along well with each other?"

Arakawa-san's usual butler expression changed slightly.

"To be honest, I'm not sure myself. Because I've only started working here a week ago."

"A week!?" Both Haruhi and I exclaimed.

Arakawa-san nodded without wincing.

"Yes, I am indeed a butler, but I've been hired as a stand-in contractual butler. My contract stipulates that I would serve this mansion for two weeks during summer."

"So does that mean you only work in this mansion and have not been by Keiichi-san's side before?"

"Yes."

So Arakawa-san is a stand-in butler hired by Keiichi-san. If that's the case, maybe……

Haruhi asked the same question I was about to ask,

“Is Mori-san also the same? Is she also a stand-in maid?”

“You’re absolutely correct. She has also been hired for these two weeks.”

Such a lavish way for Keiichi-san to hire a butler and maid just for two weeks during the summer. I felt he may be a bit casual with how he spends his money, but to hire a butler and maid like that……

As I nearly revealed my thoughts, I immediately held them back again. I cautiously examined Arakawa-san’s face. He looked like an old gentleman wearing a clean armour. He does seem like that sort of person, but……

I didn’t say anything, and had that little thought buried deep within my heart. I’ll ask him later when I see him.

“I see, so there are permanent and contractual servants, I’ve really learnt something new today.”

How is that knowledge new? Haruhi nodded as though fully understanding something.

“Since we can’t enter the room, there’s nothing we can do here. Kyon, let’s go to the next place.”

She pulled my arm and strode forward.

“Now where’re we going?”

“Outside, to see if the boat’s gone.”

I really didn’t want to wander purposelessly with Haruhi under this stormy day.

“I only believe what I see with my eyes. Information that gets passed around usually gets mixed up with unnecessary noise. Listen, Kyon, the most important observations are first-hand ones. Second-hand information from the eyes or hands of other people is not to be believed.”

Well, from a certain point, she was right. But does that mean besides those that enter our field of vision, we can’t believe anything else?

As I pondered about the effectiveness of the information medium, Haruhi had brought me to the first floor, where Mori-san was standing by the base of the stairs.

“Are you two going outside?”

Mori-san asked me and Haruhi, Haruhi replied,

“Yeah, I want to see if the boat’s still here.”

“I don’t think it’s here anymore.”

“Why’s that?”

Mori-san replied with a smile,

“I saw Yutaka-sama last night, he seemed to be in a hurry as he left the entrance hall.”

I exchanged glances with Haruhi.

“You mean Yutaka-san had stolen the boat and left the island?”

Mori-san smiled softly and slowly moved her lips,

“I only passed by Yutaka-sama in the corridor, I didn’t actually see him go out. But that was the last I saw of Yutaka-sama.”

“What time was it?” Haruhi asked.

“I guess around one in the morning.”

That was when we were getting drunk and sleeping very soundly.

Does that mean Keiichi-san fell on the floor during this time as well?

Once the door was opened, the raindrops fell onto our bodies. We spent quite some time just trying to open the door, which had become very heavy due to the strong winds. In a few seconds, Haruhi and I were soaked wet from head to toe. If I had known, I would’ve prepared a swimsuit.

The dark grey clouds extended towards the horizon, this reminded me of the Sealed Dimension we were trapped in before. I don’t think I’ll ever like seeing such a monotonous world.

“Let’s go!”

Though her hair and T-shirt had been soaked so wet that they stuck to her body, Haruhi still bravely walked forward in the rain. I had no choice but to follow her, as she was still tightly grabbing my wrist.

The wind was so strong that if we had wings, we would be blown off easily. Braving the heavy rain, we finally managed to come to a spot where we can see the pier. If we were not careful, we could fall off the cliff. No matter how brave I got, I started to feel that things were getting bad. I

think I would turn in my grave if it was only me that fell off, so I grabbed Haruhi's hand in return. I felt my chances of survival would be higher if I fell with her.

We finally came to the top of the stairway.

"You see it, Kyon?"

Haruhi's voice scattered across the wind, I faced her and nodded,

"Yeah."

The pier was nearly covered in water, the only activity by the seaside were the large waves splashing upon them on the shores.

"There's no boat. If it wasn't carried off by the waves, then it was driven off."

That was our only means of leaving this island. Looking far, we could see no sign of that luxurious speedboat within the vast sea.

And so, we've been isolated on this lone island.

We returned to the mansion at a turtle's pace, by the time we made it inside, we were both soaked wet.

"Please use these."

Expecting our return, Mori-san had been waiting for us and handed us towels she had prepared. She asked with concern,

"What did you find?"

"It seems you're right."

Haruhi wiped her hair with the towel, looking dissatisfied.

"The boat's gone, but we don't know when."

I don't know if she was born like that, but Mori-san's face continued to smile softly like the light of a firefly. Though Tamaru Keiichi-san's murder had shaken her a bit, yet her calm demeanor reflects her professionalism. Perhaps this reaction was quite normal for a for-hire maid.

I apologized with Haruhi for wetting the entrance corridor, then we decided to return to our rooms to get changed.

“Come to my room later.”

Haruhi said as she walked up the stairs.

“At this moment, it’s better to stick together. I just can’t relax if I can’t see everyone safe. If something were to happen……”

Haruhi stopped midway. I could understand what she was trying to say, so I didn’t make any witty comments this time.

We arrived on the second floor and found Koizumi standing at the corridor.

“Welcome back.”

Koizumi carried his usual smile and gestured to us with his eyes. He was standing just outside Haruhi’s room.

“What are you doing?”

Haruhi asked, and Koizumi’s smile became that of an embarassed one, he shrugged his shoulder and said,

“I had wanted to come to Suzumiya-san’s room to discuss what we should do next, but Nagato-san wouldn’t let me in.”

“Why?”

“Well……”

Haruhi knocked on the door.

“Yuki, it’s me, open the door!”

After a brief pause, Nagato’s voice came from behind the door.

“I was instructed not to open the door for anyone.”

Asahina-san still seems to be sleeping. Haruhi played with the towel on her head with her fingers.

“It’s alright now, Yuki. So open the door.”

“That would be a violation of my order to not open the door for anyone.”

Haruhi looked at me with a startled look, then turned back to face the door.

“Yuki, what I meant by anyone is people besides us! Myself, Kyon and Koizumi-kun are different. We’re all companions in the SOS Brigade, right?”

“No one said anything about that. What I heard was not to let anyone in; that is my interpretation.”

Nagato’s calm voice sounded like a female priest spreading the messages of the gods.

“Hey, Nagato!”

I decided to cut in,

“Haruhi has cancelled that order. If you don’t believe it, I’ll recite that order for her. So open the door! Please.”

Nagato seemed to consider that for a few seconds behind the door. The sound of the door unlocking can be heard and the door slowly opened.

“……”

Nagato’s eyes swept through our heads, and silently backed up inside.

“Really! Yuki, you ought to be more flexible! You’ve got to understand the meaning properly!”

Haruhi asked Koizumi to wait a bit while she changed and entered the room. I wanted to change into something dry as well, so I made my exit.

“See you later then, Koizumi.”

I walked and thought about something.

Was that all just a prank by Nagato? Yet it’s a very hard-to-comprehend prank that could cause misunderstandings.

Nagato, please. Nobody’s going to think of it as a joke if you always carry that face with you. You should at least make a smile when you’re pulling a prank. Or you could just smile meaninglessly like Koizumi, you’d look better like that.

Though now’s not the right time to pull any pranks.

I removed my wet clothes and changed into a new set of clothes along with my underwear, then returned to the corridor. Koizumi is no longer there. I knocked on Haruhi’s door.

“It’s me.”

Koizumi opened the door for me. As I stepped inside and closed the door,

“I heard the boat’s missing.”

Koizumi said leaning by the wall.

Haruhi squatted on the bed. Even Haruhi, who was normally brash, didn’t feel this was worth being glad over. She lifted her head looking troubled,

“It’s gone, right, Kyon?”

“Yeah.” I said.

Koizumi said,

“Someone must have driven it off. No, it’s already meaningless to say ‘someone.’ There’s no doubt the one who ran way is Yutaka-san.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“Because there’s no one else.”

Koizumi answered coolly.

“Besides us, there was no one else who was invited to this island. The only invited guest that has disappeared from the mansion is Yutaka-san. No matter how you put it, he has to be the suspect who has escaped by boat.”

Koizumi continued with his smooth speech,

“In other words, he is the killer. He must’ve escaped during the night.”

This matches with Yutaka-san’s unslept bedsheets, and Mori-san’s testimony.

Haruhi told Koizumi about our previous conversation with Mori-san.

“As expected from Suzumiya-san, so you’ve heard about it.”

I purposelessly made a “Hmph~.” sound at Koizumi’s blatant bootlicking.

“Yutaka-san seemed to have left in a hurry as if he was afraid of something, this matches with the testimony by the last witness to have seen him. I’ve also confirmed this with Arakawa-san.”

But isn’t it suicide to drive a speedboat at night into the middle of a storm?

“Then it must be very bad for him not to leave the island, like trying to leave the scene of crime.”

“Can Yutaka-san drive the speedboat?”

“We haven’t been able to confirm that, but we should be able to deduce that from the results. Since the boat’s now missing.”

“Wait!”

Haruhi raised her hand and won her right to speak.

“What about Keiichi-san’s door? Who locked it? Did Yutaka-san do that as well?”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

Koizumi gently made a denial gesture.

“According to Arakawa-san, both the master key and the backup key for that room are kept by Keiichi-san. After some searching, we found both keys inside the room.”

“Maybe someone made another duplicate key.”

I raised the question that came out of my mind, Koizumi shook his head.

“This is the first time Yutaka-san has come to this mansion, I don’t think he would have enough time to prepare a duplicate.”

Koizumi waved his hands in a surrendering gesture.

The room fell silent, the unharmonious sound of the heavy wind and rain shook the air, becoming an insignificant distant memory.

Haruhi and I were both speechless and remained quiet. Koizumi broke off this depressing silence,

“But it would be strange if Yutaka-san were to have committed this crime last night.”

“What do you mean?” Haruhi asked.

“When I touched Keiichi-san, he was still warm, as if he was still alive recently.”

Koizumi gave a smile, then turned and faced the silent fairy sitting patiently like a maid by Asahina-san’s side.

“Nagato-san, what was Keiichi-san’s body temperature when we found him lying on the ground?”

“36.3 degrees Celsius.”

Wait a moment, Nagato, how do you even know Keiichi-san's body temperature without even touching him? And the way she answered the question so swiftly was as though she was expecting it…… I didn't express my doubts loudly.

The only person with doubts would be Haruhi, but she seemed to be thinking of other stuff, as her head didn't turn towards this way.

"Isn't that near the normal body temperature? When was the crime committed?"

"When a person stops all living activity, the body temperature would drop by one degree Celsius per hour. From this we can estimate the time of death for Keiichi-san to be within one hour before he was found."

"Wait, Koizumi."

Time for me to cut in.

"Didn't Yutaka-san escape during the night?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But you said the time of death was within one hour?"

"That's correct."

I pressed hard on my temple.

"So does this mean Yutaka-san left the mansion at night and hid somewhere, then returned in the morning to kill Keiichi-san, and then escaped by boat?"

"No, that's not the case."

Koizumi casually rejected my theory.

"Assuming a small margin of error for the time of death, it should be around one hour before we discovered him. But we were already gathered in the dining hall then. Not only did we see Yutaka-san, we didn't even hear any strange noise. Even in this storm, it would be too unnatural not to hear anything."

"Just what's going on here?"

Haruhi said frustratingly. She crossed her arms and glared at me and Koizumi. It's useless glaring at me! If you have any questions, ask the smiling hunk over there!

Koizumi spoke softly again as though it were a normal conversation,

“This isn’t some mystery, just a tragedy.”

I sure didn’t see anything tragic from the looks of your eyes.

“I believe it is a fact that Yutaka-san has killed Keiichi-san, or there would be no reason for him to escape.”

Well, yeah?

“I don’t know what argument they had or what the motive is, the thing is Yutaka-san has attacked Keiichi-san with a knife. He must’ve hidden the knife behind his back, then suddenly revealed it and stabbed with all his force. Keiichi-san must’ve been almost defenceless as he was taken by surprise.”

It’s as though you’ve witnessed the whole thing.

“But the edge of the blade probably hasn’t reached the heart. It probably didn’t even scratched his skin. The knife merely penetrated the notebook on Keiichi-san’s chest pocket.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Haruhi frowned and asked,

“Then why did Keiichi-san die? Did someone else kill him?”

“No one killed him. There is no murderer in this case, Keiichi-san’s death was a pure accident.”

“Then what about Yutaka-san? Why did he run?”

“Because he thought he had killed someone.”

Koizumi replied casually and lifted his forefinger. Which super sleuth does he intend to turn into?

“Let me tell you what I think what has happened. Last night, Yutaka-san went to Keiichi-san with the intent of killing him. He stabbed Keiichi-san with his knife, but the knife was stuck in the notebook, so no fatal wound was made.”

I really had no idea what he was trying to say, I decided to just let him continue.

“But the trouble begins here. Keiichi-san truly believed he has been stabbed. Though the knife only penetrated the notebook, he could still feel the impact of the knife thrusting in. He must’ve been shocked after seeing the edge of the knife standing on his chest.”

I think I’m beginning to get where Koizumi was going. Hey, could it be……

“Being fooled by this illusion, Keiichi-san fainted. In this situation, a person would either fall sideways or backwards.”

Koizumi continued,

“Seeing all this, Yutaka-san also believed he has killed him. The rest is simple, he can only escape. This murder probably isn’t premeditated, but rather a killing motive that is borne of passion. That’s why he has to escape by speedboat in the middle of a heavy storm.”

“Huh? But if that’s the case……”

Koizumi interrupted Haruhi before she could continue,

“Please let me continue. The key is the actions Keiichi-san took after he fainted. He stayed unconscious till dawn, all the way till we came to knock on his door when we were wondering why he hasn’t got up.”

He was still alive then?

“Keiichi-san was startled by the knock and got up and walked near the door. But as he would usually feel ill after waking up, he must’ve felt drowsy then. As he walked towards the door under this state, he suddenly remembered.”

“Remembered what?” Haruhi asked. Koizumi replied to her with a smile,

“He remembered that he was killed by his brother. In a flash, the image of Yutaka-san wielding a knife reappeared in his mind, and Keiichi-san frantically locked the door.”

I couldn’t stand this any longer, so I cut in,

“Are you saying that’s the whole truth behind this sealed room?”

“Unfortunately, that’s what I believe. Keiichi-san had lost all sense of time after fainting, he probably thought Yutaka-san had returned to finish him off. I think it was only a few seconds from him locking the door to us holding the door knob.”

“If the killer had wanted to return to give him the finishing blow, why would he knock on the door intentionally?”

“Keiichi-san’s mind was very blurry then, so this was the swift conclusion he made with his half-conscious mind.”

“After locking the door, Keiichi-san tried to back off from the door, thinking what a dire situation he was in. That was when the tragedy happened.”

Koizumi shook his head, as if telling a sad story.

“Keiichi-san tripped and tumbled over like this.”

Koizumi bent his body and made a pose of tumbling forwards.

“As a result, the knife which had only penetrated into the notebook in his chest pocket was now thrust into his chest with the force of the floor, leaving only the hilt outside. The knife had gone straight into Keiichi-san’s heart, thereby killing him……”

Koizumi looked at me and Haruhi, whose jaws were opened like idiots, and said firmly,

“That is the truth.”

What did you say?

Keiichi-san died in such a ridiculous way? Is it really that simple? It was already strange enough for the knife to land right on top of the notebook, and it’s also puzzling for Yutaka-san to not know he actually didn’t kill anyone.

I tried to organize my thoughts, preparing to argue.

“AH!”

Haruhi suddenly shouted, that gave me a fright. Why’d you shout all of a sudden like that?

“But, Koizumi-kun……”

Haruhi said half way then stiffened up. Her face seems shocked, what was it that made her shout so loud? Was it something Koizumi said that she couldn’t accept?

Haruhi looked at me. Once our eyes met, she looked away and was about to look at Koizumi, but then changed her mind and decided to look at the ceiling for some reason.

“Um……nothing. That’s got to be the case. Hmm, how should I put it?”

She muttered incomprehensibly, then fell silent.

Asahina-san remained sleeping, while Nagato looked at Koizumi with a blank stare.

The meeting was adjourned for now. We decided to return to our rooms. According to Koizumi, once the storm’s subsided, the police would come over at once. So we began to pack up and prepared to leave before the police arrived.

After spending some time in the room, I carried a lot of questions and went inside one of the rooms.

“Yes?”

Koizumi lifted his head as he was folding his clothes and smiled at me.

“We need to talk.”

There was only one reason I visited Koizumi.

“I cannot understand.”

That was natural, as some of Koizumi’s deductions were full of holes that couldn’t explain itself.

“Based on your deductions, the body should be lying face down, but Keiichi-san was found lying face up. How do you explain that?”

Koizumi stood up and faced me smiling.

This smiling idiot answered as a matter-of-factly,

“That’s simple, that’s because the deduction I told everyone wasn’t the truth.”

I wasn’t surprised by that.

“I guess you’re right. The only one who would believe your deduction would be the unconscious Asahina-san. If I had asked Nagato, she would probably tell me the whole truth, but that’s cheating and I don’t like doing things that way. So why don’t you tell me your real thoughts on this?”

The smile which has distorted Koizumi’s face now made a low and irritating laughter.

“Then let me tell you! The truth that I told everyone was correct up to the middle, only the last part was wrong.”

I kept quiet.

“It was correct up to when Keiichi-san walked towards the door with the knife on his chest. He then instinctively locked the door. I then made up the rest.”

Koizumi gestured me to sit down, I ignored that request.

“Looks like you’ve noticed, I must’ve underestimated you.”

“Cut the crap and continue.”

Koizumi shrugged his shoulders,

“We rammed the door with our bodies and burst it open. To be precise, that would have been me, you and Arakawa-san. Then when the door burst opened, we fell hard inwards.”

I remained silent and urged him to go on.

“You must’ve realized what that would result in. Keiichi-san, who was standing in front of the door, was hit face on by the door, and the knife as well.”

I tried to visualize such a scene.

“From this collision, the knife then killed Keiichi-san.”

Koizumi sat on the bed again and looked at me as though challenging me.

“In other words, the killers would be……”

Koizumi smiled and said as though talking to himself,

“Me, you and Arakawa-san.”

I looked down at Koizumi. If there was a mirror, I bet I could see myself with cold eyes. Koizumi ignored my reaction and went on,

“Just as you have discovered, Suzumiya-san came to the same conclusions, that’s why she didn’t say what she wanted to say. She didn’t want to report us, or maybe she wanted to protect her companions.”

Koizumi said without doubt. I still couldn’t accept this. My cerebral neocortex hasn’t aged to such an extent to be fooled by this second fake deduction.

“Hmph.”

I mumbled and stared at Koizumi.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t believe you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think, after coming up with a flawed deduction, you’ve created a second theory to try and deceive everyone, but I won’t be fooled by such rhetoric.”

Don’t I look cool right now? Then allow me to continue.

“Think about where the whole problem is! Let’s start with the murder itself. How can such a case happen under such perfect conditions?”

This time it was Koizumi’s turn to remain silent, urging me to go on.

“The typhoon may be random or created by Haruhi, but that’s not important. The key is that what’s happened has created a body.”

I paused and licked my lips.

“You may think that this is exactly what Haruhi wished for. But no matter how much bullshit that girl comes up with, Haruhi wouldn’t really wish for anyone to die. You can tell just by looking at her. This means the one who created this incident isn’t Haruhi. Besides, our arrival at the scene of crime wasn’t coincidental either.”

“Huh?” Koizumi said, “And why is that?”

“The one who started this incident……or to be exact, this summer field trip for the SOS Brigade, is none other than you, am I right?”

As if being caught red handed, Koizumi’s smiling face stiffened for a few seconds, but……

Koizumi began to giggle.

“I surrender. How did you find out?”

Koizumi looked at me, his eyes were the same as I saw them when in the Literary Club room.

My cerebral grey matter isn’t just there for looks, you know. I felt relaxed for a bit then said,

“At that time, you asked Nagato for the body temperature.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“You deduced the time of death based on that.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Nagato is a very useful person. As you well know, she can tell us almost anything. Instead of asking her for the body temperature, you should’ve asked Nagato for the approximate time of death. No, I think she would even tell us the exact time rounding off to the nearest second.”

“That makes sense.”

“If you had asked for the time of death, Nagato would simply reply that the person isn’t dead. Moreover, never once did you refer to Keiichi-san in that state as a ‘body’.”

“That was a fair way to do it then.”

“And I may not look like it, but I do pay attention to things that matter, especially the interior of Keiichi-san’s room door. From your deduction, the door should have landed on the hilt of the knife with a great impact, great enough to thrust the knife into a person’s body. If that were true, there should be at least a dent on the door. Yet the door surface looked brand new.”

“Such amazing skills of observation.”

“One more thing, there’s something strange with Arakawa-san and Mori-san. They both claim to only work here for less than a week. They were hired a week ago and came to this island, is that right?”

“Yes, is something wrong with that?”

“Of course there is, because your attitude was too suspicious. On the day when we first arrived, do you remember what you said to Arakawa-san and Mori-san who were waiting for us as we got off the ferry?”

“What did I say?”

“You said ‘It’s been a while.’ Don’t you find that strange? How can it be possible for you to say this to them? You’ve also said this is the first time you’ve been to this island, so it should be the first time you have met them. So how can you go and chat with them as though you’ve known them for some time?”

Koizumi only giggled.

This meant he had no intention of arguing with me. I understood everything as I began to feel exhausted. Koizumi then opened his mouth,

“Yes, this was all previously arranged. A ridiculously short play. I just didn’t expect you to find out.”

“Don’t underestimate me.”

“I do apologize. Though I admit I’m surprised. I had wanted to find a time to eventually confess, I never thought the truth would be revealed so soon.”

“Does that mean Tamaru-san, Mori-san and the rest are all your accomplices? Your comrades in that ‘Organization’ of yours?”

“That’s correct. For a bunch of amateurs, don’t you think their acting’s superb?”

The knife on the chest actually had a retractable blade; the blood is actually some red dye; Keiichi-san was of course faking his death; while Yutaka-san was merely hiding on the other side of the island with the speedboat.

Koizumi cheerily revealed the truth.

“Why did you do all this for?”

“To cure Suzumiya-san’s boredom, as well as reducing the burden on our shoulders.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe I should tell you. To put it simply, to prevent Suzumiya-san from coming up with any funny ideas, we had prepared some entertainment for her. Right now isn’t Suzumiya-san thinking about this the whole time?”

Haruhi seemed to believe that we were the killers, was it necessary to go this far?

Afterwards, Haruhi was unusually gentle. I really felt uncomfortable with that.

“Then we ought to move our plans forward.” Koizumi said, “According to our original plans, as we returned by ferry to Honshu island, Tamaru Keiichi-san, Yutaka-san, Mori-san and Arakawa-san would be greeting us cheerfully at the harbour there. Of course, they would conceal everything about the ‘Organization’. As of right now, they’re still my distant relatives.”

What a surprise party.

I sighed deeply. This sort of prank only works on Haruhi. If Haruhi got pissed as a result, then you’re responsible for dousing the flames, because I’ll be running for my life.

Koizumi winked and smiled,

“Oh dear. I think I’d better apologize to her. I’ll go and confess to her right away with Tamaru-san and the rest. It must be tiring for him to play a dead body for so long.”

I silently looked out of the window.

What would Haruhi do? Would she be furious at being deceived? Or would she appreciate the joke and laugh out loud? No matter what the result, her inconsistent mental state sure is easy to predict today. Koizumi smiled wryly,

“We even prepared people playing detectives and forensic experts, but it seems our hard work will go to waste. I never thought it would end in such a whimper. Our plan was to include a thorough search of the mansion and crime scene, such a pity.”

That would be because you didn’t plan far enough.

I looked at the gloomy sky and thought, how fine will the weather become in the next few hours?

In the end, Koizumi didn't lose his vice-commander badge. After the typhoon left, on the ferry trip home under the clear blue skies, Haruhi was in a good mood all the way until we parted at the station. It's good that Haruhi has a simple mind of treating a joke as such.

Of course, Koizumi had to end up buying boxed lunches and juice cans for everyone. For things to end so smoothly, I felt he had gotten off lightly.

Nagato probably knew the truth from the beginning, and maintained her reactionless attitude. While Asahina-san yelled, "How can you do this?" after waking up and protested cutely. But when Koizumi, the Tamaru brothers and the two servants both lowered their heads and apologized, she quickly apologized back, "Ah, i…it's alright, don't let it bother you."

By the way, after taking a photo on the deck on the ferry trip back to Honshu island, Haruhi made her booking,

"We're counting on you for the winter field trip, Koizumi-kun. Next time come up with a more shocking script! We're going to the mountain villa next time, and it has to be in a blizzard. If you don't come up with a haunted mansion that suits my expectations, I'll really be mad. Hmm, I'm so looking forward to it!"

"Erm……what should I do?"

Like a rookie Nazi officer being told by the Führer to lead just a single Panzer division to capture the Allied commander on the western front at the end of the Second World War, Koizumi smiled awkwardly and turned to beg me for help.

I looked at Koizumi, who was like a defender trying to stop what seemed like a great goal near the end of a soccer match when the scores are even after overtime, and said without hesitation,

"Well, I'm also looking forward to it, Koizumi."

I look forward that it will be a game that I could at least solve and not end up in a mess.

At the same time, this is also the best way to stop Haruhi from getting too bored and coming up with any funny ideas.

Author's notes

I'm not too sure about the details, but it seems to be standard practice to write some sort of notes at the end of each book, everyone's so used to this practice that they've taken it for granted already. The editor even told me, "Write as many pages as you like," But this time, I've decided to let this opportunity pass this time, and instead write some comments regarding the short stories compiled in this volume just to make up the pages.

I'll be putting down some brief thoughts about these stories, so I won't be stuffing you with the usual rubbish of "One year has already passed so quickly, let alone two months," so here we go.

The Boredom of Suzumiya Haruhi

This story carries the same title as the book itself. This is the first story where the reader gets reacquainted with the SOS Brigade. I think this story was published on the Sneaker magazine two months before "The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi" got published.

At first I was quite worried, since it didn't make sense to release a sequel before the main story even got published. Yet it seems I was the only person who was worried, as no one else seems to have any problems with it, I was relieved as well. As this story was thought up and written very quickly in a short time, I was concerned as to how well it would do. In the end no one said anything bad or good about it, at least I never heard anyone's comments, so I told myself that this isn't too bad either.

By the way, as far as I can remember in my life, I've participated in not more than ten baseball tournaments. As a second baseman who couldn't catch any flying balls, there was nothing I did to make myself renowned. I also recently discovered that I have never scored a run before, though it's too late for me to be thinking of this, I'm still stunned whenever I think about it.

Bamboo Leaf Rhapsody

At first I wanted to call this story "The Apprehension of Asahina Mikuru," but then I thought people wouldn't be able to recognize this as part of a series, hence the name change. At that time I never intended that a short story I had just published would have a sequel. I still remember how surprised I was when I saw the magazine print the words, "To be continued" at the end of the story. That feeling is still fresh in my mind.

As there was a time traveler, it didn't make sense not to have a story about time traveling, so I came up with this story. Yet deep inside I hoped that this would become the prelude to what's to come later on.

Mysterique Sign

Due to chance, this story took the least time from the moment I thought of it to its completion. Just as I was wondering what the characters should be doing, I realized I had already finished the story. Ever since publishing this story, I had wanted to change the series title to “Fight on, Nagato-san,” but this way the story would end up in a dead-end, so I abandoned that idea in the end. However, of all the characters, she has the most potential for development, even I am expecting a lot from her. Nagato-san, please fight on. By the way, what should I do with the glasses? Would she look better with them after all?

I had originally intend to give more scenes to the Computer Group president, but right now my thoughts are too disorganized, who knows how he’ll develop.

Lone Island Syndrome

As a matter of fact, I started writing this before “Mysterique Sign,” and had intended for this to be published first, but then I realized this story was getting longer as I kept writing. Due to my nature of wanting to take full responsibility for my works, this story has exceeded the pages originally intended for a short story. And as a result, this story has become the longest story in this book, a “bonus” that is neither too long nor too short. I still have a lot to learn from this lesson. I’m always thinking of ways to try and improve the way I work, but that’s easier said than done. When I look back at my life, there were only a handful of times where I actually fulfilled what I told myself to do. For this reason alone, my brain has already regressed to that of an amoeba.

Is there anyone out there willing to provide a luxury living quarters in a lone island for me to stay for one week? If you need a witness, I think I’m more than capable of doing the job. Of course, it’s possible I would spend the whole day sleeping instead.

And so, I’m very lucky to have published my third book. This is all thanks to everyone. I’d really like to list out everyone’s names, job titles and even nicknames. This includes all my readers, though I don’t think I could ever find out their names, all I can do is give you my most sincere thanks.

Let us meet again in another place.

—Tanigawa Nagaru

Project Staff (at time of C&D)

- Project Administrator: thelastguardian
- Project Supervisor: Onizuka-gto

Translators

ACTIVE

- An Engrish Speaker
- Deskoh91
- GDsMDDLFNGR
- HolyCow
- Kinny Riddle
- Magus
- Shiratoriryuuko

A.W.O.L

- BaKaFiSh
- Harunako

K.I.A

- arcticphoenix16
- Freak Of Nature

Scripts Partially Contributed

We would like to thank these users for contributing portions of translated script:

- skythewood for Volume 3's The Boredom of Suzumiya Haruhi
- Canthelpit for Volume 9's Chapter 3

Editors

ACTIVE

- The naming game
- Bicube
- Darkoneko
- Nandeyanen
- Smidge204
- Molitar (PDF Editor)
- velocity7 (Image Editor)

A.W.O.L

- BlckKnght
- Nutcase

R&R

- Da~Mike

M.I.A

- keito

K.I.A

- Adelina
- Ryukaiser
- Baltakatei
- Psieye
- Eleutheria